THE 10,000,000 DOLLAR GETAWAY

THE INSIDE STORY OF THE LUFTHANSA HEIST

DOUG FEIDEN

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To Bobby Spellman of the old *Journal American* and the old *New York Post.*

“Kennedy Airport is the largest inspiration to the criminal impulse within our geographical limits.”

Murray Kempton
New York Post columnist

“Don’t read any newspapers under any circumstances.”

Judge Mark A. Costantino,
in the Lufthansa trial

CHAPTER ONE

Body Count

"It's Christmas Day,
And we're on our way
To a ventilation job
In Gravesend Bay."

Irish cop, New York City

It was a crime that was hatched in the bars of Ozone Park. Barely three hours after it was over, the word was already out on the street. Even before the first corpse surfaced, everyone knew it was coming. The name didn't matter. The face wasn't important. The identification papers in the wallet didn't count for much. The how and the why meant as little as the who. It could just as well have been any one of a number of people. The only thing that mattered was that the first dead man wouldn't be the last. "The contracts are out," one mobster said. It was his use of the plural that was most disturbing.

The money from Building 261 hadn't been stashed, or even counted yet. The jewelry hadn't been divided. The foreign currency hadn't been washed. The pawnshops and the black markets hadn't been flooded with hot goods

yet. None of the thieves had left town. There would be time soon enough for all of that. For the moment, there were priorities—grim priorities. And everyone knew what came next. “The contracts are out.” Plural.

It was a crime that started clean and ended dirty. The day after it was over, an informant told the FBI: “Now, they stack the bodies.” The word filtered down through the wise-guy network: “Stay low, real low, if you don’t want to get ventilated.” The word filtered down as it only can in Queens: “Trouble brewing. We’re going on the mattress. Stay low.”

It was a crime that would touch thousands of people, transforming the lives of everybody who got tangled in its web, and ending the lives of at least ten of them. Two days after it was over, the mob *capo* spoke to his underboss. There were bodies coming. The underboss told his button man. The button man told his cargo thief. The cargo thief told his fence. The fence told his resident street pug.

It was a crime that would alter the Mafia’s means of doing business in New York, and change, perhaps forever, the very nature of the institution itself. Three days after it was over, the resident street pug told his bookmaker. Bodies were coming. The bookie told his shylock. The shy told his torpedo. The torpedo told his bartender. And the barkeep told his friend, the one who had helped him out of a jam once, the one he owed a favor to, the one who sipped beer when everybody else downed whiskey because the city bought him his drinks, the undercover cop.

If you were a wise guy, and you lived in Brooklyn and you drank in Queens, and your bartender was a wise guy too, and he caught wind of something, and he slipped you the word, you got a break many others would never get. It didn’t mean you’d stay alive, not in these circles, but at least you had a better chance. It was a crime in which a lot of people would never get that chance. Four days after it was over, from the darkened aerie

of one of the most foreboding mob joints in the city, a prominent gangster got a break. “Stay outta here,” he was told. “There’s no percentage in it for you anymore.” Who was going to argue? Others he knew wouldn’t get the word. Soon they’d be in jail, in hiding, or dead.

The law would come out of this crime looking not much better than the mob. Five days after it was over, the memo came down from the commissioner’s office at One Police Plaza. Couched in bureaucratese, it made no sense at all. It spoke of a “rapidly accelerating turnover rate expected among organized crime figures.” It became the job of the station house captains to translate that double talk into a street English their line men could understand. “Dump jobs is what it means,” said the lieutenant at the 113th. “More than one. If they know what they’re talking about downtown, you guys’ll be finding bodies in car trunks all over the precinct.”

It seldom worked out that way, but this time they knew what they were talking about downtown. The lieutenant had been right. Mob bigs had held a sit-down. They drew up a little list. They farmed out the contracts. And six days after it was over, hit teams were on the street, gin mills were staked out, private homes were ringed with bodyguards, and nine men and one woman were already living out their lives on borrowed time. For one man, in fact, time had already run out.

Seven days after it was over, NYPD Homicide got the first call. The detective on duty filed the report in classic deadpan police lingo. “Unidentified man shot DOA by unknown perps for unknown reasons,” it began. “No further,” it ended. But there it was, writ large in the police blotter. Just a week after it happened, the bloodletting had begun. The tabloids trumpeted it in streamers across six columns: “UP, DOWN, AND

INTO THE GRAVE!” And the next day, there was a new catchword sprinting through the streets: “Flatlands Tony is back.”

A not-so-funny comedy of errors and terrors had begun.

A baseball bat across the temple is a sloppy way to kill a man. The trunk of a car in Brooklyn is an unhygienic place to stow his body. But the technology of the hit was never very sophisticated, and that was the way he wanted it. There were many methods, all of them crude, none of them pretty, and Flatlands Tony knew them all.

Two hours in the acid baths, if the chemicals are properly mixed, and all that’s left of a man are the gold fillings in his teeth. Ten minutes in an auto salvage compactor, and a six-foot hoodlum becomes approximately the size of a ten-inch fanbelt, his bones ground so finely into the metal that they can become a part of next year’s Oldsmobile. Equally effective, though not nearly so refined, is the old Sicilian method: six or seven shots fired into the chest and head from a low-caliber handgun at close range. Then there’s the Elliot Ness-style submachine gun. Or the Colt pistol with the silencer screwed on to muffle the blast; with a rare touch of poetry, that’s known in mob parlance as “the whispering death.” For disposal, there’s the East River, the Hudson, Jamaica Bay, the Gowanus Canal, and the swirling southern currents of the ebb tide.

This was Flatlands Tony’s work, murder for hire, and a week after it was over he had already completed his first assignment.

Hulking, barrel-chested, massively built, yet benign, almost grandfatherly in appearance, Flatlands Tony was known as a “torpedo” to the mob, a “hit man” to the newspaper-reading public, and a common murderer to the FBI, which desperately wanted to lock him up, but had

never quite figured out how. He was scar-faced and in his mid sixties. His hair was gray and wavy, giving him an almost distinguished appearance, and his suits all had continental labels. His mug shots showed him grinning ridiculously. For Flatlands Tony was quick to flash a toothy, endearing, almost childlike smile, a strange trait for a notorious, cold-blooded killer. That smile became his trademark. It seemed somehow to express all the glee he so obviously found in his calling.

Two years ago, Flatlands Tony had twenty notches. Six months after it was over, he would have thirty.

Flatlands was, of course, not his real name. It was just the alias by which he was known to the mob and the law alike. It came from the tough ethnic neighborhood in Brooklyn where he grew up, and where, for old times' sake, he enjoyed leaving butchered bodies behind like calling cards.

Flatlands was a professional, an old-school killer who made a point of not knowing which Cosa Nostra *capo* put out the contracts he executed. He always dealt through intermediaries, which made him less vulnerable if there were reprisals, and he was never physically present when the hit came down, which allowed him to establish a foolproof alibi. He had learned long ago that there were always flunkies willing to pull the trigger for you. Police credited him with some thirty hits in his career, but he was only hauled into court once, years ago, in his apprentice days, and the charges were abruptly dropped when the star witness for the prosecution suddenly refused to testify after a mysterious headfirst plunge down a flight of stairs.

The exasperated federal prosecutor called Flatlands to the stand one last time. "Do you have any moral scruples about killing a man?" he was asked. "Do you have any qualms about pumping someone full of lead? Does your conscience bother you even a little bit when you see the pictures in the papers the next day of your victim's wife in tears and all broken down?"

There was an objection, court records show, but it was overruled. Flatlands Tony huddled briefly with his attorneys. There was a whispered exchange. When it finally came, the response was terse, muted, predictable.

“Based on my constitutional rights,” he mouthed, “I respectfully decline to answer the question on the grounds that my answer may tend to incriminate me.” Then Flatlands Tony looked up at the judge on the bench and smiled.

In New York City in the old days, the streetlights used to kick off at 3:00 A.M. The twenty-four-hour traffic light was still just an item with a question mark on the city planners’ drawing boards. There were no two-way radios in the squad cars, and the blare of the police sirens sounded much more like a plaintive, pitiful whine. The getaway was easier back then, detection problematical. There would be fewer witnesses and less chance of pursuit. In those days, if you killed a man on a job, no more than seven or eight people would ever know you did it. Now, technology was catching up with the torpedo, and police estimated that anywhere between ten and fifteen people were aware of the identity of the killer in any gangland hit. The trick, of course, was in getting those people to come forth, something they’d very seldom do. On the other side of the law, the trick was to get them muzzled. And so the whole focus of the hit man’s job had broadened; today he has to worry as much about the getaway as the kill itself. Flatlands Tony resented these changes in the basic fiber of his work. That was why he preferred places like Bath Beach, Mill Basin, Canarsie, Red Hook, Carroll Gardens, Bensonhurst, Gravesend Bay, and, of course, Flatlands, when it came to choosing a dump site for his victim. For these were the solid ethnic Italian neighborhoods of Brooklyn, where, as Flatlands Tony himself would put it, “nobody knows nothing.”

There were other changes, too, from the old days, changes that couldn't be resisted. Back then, he killed Sicilians on behalf of Neapolitans, and he killed Neapolitans on behalf of Sicilians. Those were the days. But all that was a dead era. The blood feuds were over. The mob was in no danger of becoming an equal-opportunity employer; it was as undemocratic as ever, and Italian to the core. But there were hangers-on now too, scores of them, and six months after it was over, a black, a Jew, two Irishmen, and a woman would be rubbed out, gangland-style, along with the usual assortment of Italians.

Six days after it was over, Flatlands Tony already had the first contracts. And seven days after it was over, the mortician already had the first body.

Somewhere, somehow, someone was covering his tracks, severing the cords all over town, killing off any links between himself and the crime. But who? Who had ordered the killings? And what was the crime? Flatlands Tony didn't have a clue. All he knew was what he read in the papers. There were some things it was better not to know, and wiser never to ask.

The dawning would only come later, much later, when it was too late.

It had something to do with what happened a week ago. Something about the matter of Building 261. Something about a man named Jimmy the Gent.

Brooklyn. Springtime. Daybreak.

Joseph (Gas Station) Manri had a beef. An age-old beef. He wanted more money. He had only gotten half of his $200,000 share, and he was rudely demanding the rest. With him was Bobby (Air France) McMahon, his chauffeur and bodyguard and fix-it man. McMahon had a similar gripe.

The two men had an appointment. The appointment was in a candy store, one of those old-time jobs which dealt in comic books, newspapers, and chocolate egg creams in the front room, and loans, ponies, numbers, and a dozen other rackets in the back. The candy store was on 86th Street, in the commercial heart of Bensonhurst, an old-line southern Italian neighborhood that's called home by more mobsters per square block than any other place in the world, with the possible exception of Castellammare del Golfo, a small fishing village in northwest Sicily. Flatlands Tony knew both the neighborhood and the candy store well, and he had learned of the appointment. He had a man waiting. In the back room of the candy store, Manri and McMahon were told they could pick up the money from two men at a drop site four miles away. When they got to the designated street corner, they spotted the two men carrying canvas money sacks. The men got in the back seat, slowly opened the bags, and drew out pistols. "Here's yours, Joey," one man said. Two shots rang out.

The next morning, NYPD Homicide files show, a schoolboy on his way to class found the bodies of Joseph Manri, forty-seven, male white, also known as "Gas Station Joey," and Robert McMahon, forty-two, male white, also known as "Air France" or "Frenchie," slumped over in the front seat well of a 1975 four-door brown Buick LeSabre parked on Schenectady Avenue near Avenue M, in the Flatlands section of Brooklyn. The men had been shot once each, professionally, in the back of the head with two .44-caliber handguns fired at close range. Police were puzzled by the discovery of two empty money bags in the back seat; no fingerprints were ever found. The official report on the hit lists the victims' occupations as "hijackers."

Manri and McMahon liked to masquerade as high rollers, letting on that they knew more than they did, but they were small fish in the circles they traveled in, and they had a knack for getting caught, as their mob aliases

derisively make plain. Manri had once done time for sticking up a gas station, an ignominious recommendation for any aspiring button man. McMahon, another noted blunderbuss, was known as the hood who had singlehandedly botched the 1972 Kennedy Airport hijacking of an Air France truck with three million dollars in the till. They were small fry who played with the big guys, but the big guys played for keeps, and they never took them seriously. They just used them, and then dumped them in the back of a car in Brooklyn.

Yet somehow this hapless duo had stumbled into something so big it dwarfed even England's 1963 Great Train Robbery, and it also cost them their lives. The day after the double killings, it was said on the street that McMahon knew all about the matter of Building 261, and had actually picked out some of the equipment used in knocking it over. It was said Manri had been inside Building 261 on the night it happened, wearing a ski mask. It was said both thugs had some inkling where the money had gone. It was said they were old drinking buddies of a man named Jimmy the Gent.

On the night of the twin murders in Brooklyn, Flatlands Tony was seen by several witnesses, dining in a restaurant in Manhattan.

Queens. Wintertime. Midnight.

Steven (Stacks) Edwards was probably asleep when the killer opened fire. He was undressed and in bed, and though he knew he was a target, he must have felt secure behind the door of his two-room Ozone Park apartment. It was latched, bolted, and double-locked. Stacks had made only one mistake: he should have chained the door, too.

It became known in the annals of New York crime as the "key killing." Stacks had given the keys to his apartment to a couple of cronies in crime,

for there was high-stakes business to be transacted there, money to be counted, and the mob needed the run of the place. Within forty-eight hours, those keys would change hands twenty-five times; they'd be passed in taverns and duplicated as they worked their way slowly, steadily, silently up through the wise-guy network. For the word was out; there was a big shot who wanted them. And at last, Flatlands Tony had the keys. He had a man waiting in an Off-Track Betting parlor. He gave him a set of the keys and he wrote down an address on a scrap of paper torn from an abandoned, day-old *Racing Form*. Then Flatlands Tony flashed his toothy smile and strode purposefully up to one of the betting windows.

That night, an hour after the light had gone off in Stack's second-floor apartment, the gunman staked out on the street below started moving. The first key opened the building door. The next four keys opened the door to apartment 2B, which was locked as only New Yorkers lock doors, but which was still not locked well enough, for the chain dangled idly in its casing. Stacks probably never saw death coming, never knew what hit him. The revolver blazed six times, but the reports were only hisses. The killer locked the door behind him. The whispering death.

The next morning, NYPD Homicide files show, the landlady at 109-16 120th Street in the Ozone Park section of Queens entered newly-rented apartment 2B and found the body of Steven Edwards, thirty-one, male black, also known as "Stacks," lying facedown in a pool of blood on his bed. He had been shot six times in the chest and head, and was still lying under the bullet-punctured blankets. There were no signs of forced entry, and no fingerprints were ever found.

Stacks was a small-timer who used to sing the blues and was kept around by the big guys largely for entertainment purposes. As a black hood, he was always on the outer fringes of the Italian mob, selling stolen

sweaters on the street, stealing credit cards, driving the wise guys around, sporting his trademark, the telltale black chauffeur's cap. He had his innings, just like anybody else, but he never could make very much out of them, and when the big chance finally came, he took the gamble and lost his life.

It took G-men months to piece together a handful of stray facts. Stacks had rented the death apartment just five days before it happened. That was part of the Plan. Stacks was found lifeless inside the apartment just seven days after it happened. That was part of the Plan, too, though of course Stacks would never know of it; he was expendable in the classic way that black crooks generally are expendable in an Italian mob. The apartment was only fifteen blocks away from Building 261. And a great many hundred-dollar bills that belonged in the vaults of that building had been diverted—stolen—and taken to Stacks' digs, just minutes after the big crime was over.

It was said that the taking of Building 261 was made possible because Stacks had once done time in the federal penitentiary in Atlanta, and his cellmate there was a man named Jimmy the Gent.

On the night of the Stacks murder in Queens, Flatlands Tony was seen by several witnesses drinking in a bar and grill in the Bronx.

Long Island. February. Broad daylight.

Theresa (Terry) Ferrara was used to mysterious phone calls at odd hours from unidentified male callers. It was part of her work. She enjoyed it. So she didn't think twice when the phone rang in her Bellmore beauty salon that evening and the voice at the other end of the line instructed her in Brooklynese to meet a "contact" at the East Bay Diner a few doors away. She told her niece to look for her if she wasn't back in fifteen minutes, and

then left without her pocketbook, money, and keys. But Terry Ferrara never made it to the East Bay Diner.

Earlier that day, Flatlands Tony had met with a crooked seaplane pilot. Everything was in order. He met with a couple of men the Nassau County cops would later describe only as “street people.” Everything was in order there, too. That sickening toothy smile flickered across his face, and he drove discreetly off away from the crime scene. The phone call came a few hours later, and as Ferrara walked jauntily toward the diner, the two men, enforcers for one of the Brooklyn mobs, leapt from their car, grabbed her, and forced her in with them. It was the proverbial “last ride.” No one knows what really happened that day, but gangland tipsters supplied a third-hand account, and the feds pieced together a likely scenario of Terry Ferrara’s final hours. It’s not very pretty.

The men drove to a desolate tract of marshland on the South Shore. The woman was bludgeoned into unconsciousness with a “blunt instrument,” anything from a baseball bat to a two-by-four. She was then carved up with a “serrated object,” anything from a meat cleaver to a hacksaw. The men drove onto a long-abandoned wharf where the seaplane was waiting. The pilot had owed the mob a favor ever since that day five years ago when a ranking hoodlum intervened on his behalf with the New York State Liquor Authority to obtain licensing for a club he owned. “How can I pay you back?” he had asked at the time. “We’ll find a way,” he was told. “It may be days or months or years, but we’ll find a way. You can fly that thing, can’t you? Someday you’ll fly it for us. Just don’t forget you owe us one.”

The seaplane pilot had never forgotten, and now the time had come to collect. The men crammed the remains into the hold of the plane, and the pilot taxied out to sea. Halfway between the Great South Bay and Atlantic City, two thousand feet above the waves, the seaplane doors banged open

and the remains of Terry Ferrara were cast limb by limb into the Atlantic Ocean.

Four months later, New Jersey homicide records show, a clam fisherman in wading boots found the decapitated, dismembered torso of a woman floating near the north jetty of Island Beach State Park in Barnegat Bay, near the Jersey shore town of Toms River. It was determined that the cadaver's chest and stomach cavities matched X-rays taken after a gallbladder operation on a woman who later vanished in Nassau County, leading authorities to identify the victim as Theresa Ferrara, twenty-seven, female white, also known as "Terry," who lived in a lavishly furnished, $1,000-a-month apartment in the Floral Park section of Queens. If any fingerprints had been left on the body, they'd been scoured clean after four months in the Atlantic Ocean.

The Ferrara disappearance had the tabloids in a tizzy: Here was the "mystery woman," the "beautiful divorcée," the "stunning brunette adventuress" who met with "foul play." At first, no one could figure out why. One of the strongest unwritten gangland laws is that you don't kill a woman. Yet Ferrara was so dangerous to the mob that she qualified as a rare exception. She ran a unisex hairdressing place on the Island, but that was too slow for her. She ran with the mob, but apparently that was too slow for her also, so it was boredom more than anything else, according to those who knew her, that made her turn government informant.

Ferrara was an inveterate partygoer and a familiar figure at the discos, beaches, and watering holes of Long Island's jet set. Her lifestyle and hundreds of contacts made her a natural for the double game she played. She socialized with mobsters, then turned them in. But she was more than a canary; she dabbled in a game with a very high mortality rate—double agentry—and she took money from both sides of the law. She told the feds

everything she knew about the matter of Building 261, and was well paid for it. But she helped the mob make possible what happened in Building 261 that night, and was quite well paid for that, too. She couldn't play both sides against the middle forever, and her downfall was sealed just forty-eight hours after it happened, when, at the urging of FBI agents, she fingered the mastermind of that whole grandiose operation in Building 261, a man named Jimmy the Gent.

At the appointed hour for the abduction of Terry Ferrara on Long Island, Flatlands Tony was seen by several witnesses, toasting a distant nephew at a wedding reception in a catering hall on Staten Island.

Brooklyn. Wintertime. Dusk.

Richard Eaton was a man a lot of people were looking for. He owed money all over town, and the word was that he had just come into a lot of cash and would start paying off if you asked him the right way, which, of course, was none too gently. He was on the lam. He hadn't had a drink in any of the usual places ever since it happened. The trick was to find him, and he had already proved an elusive quarry. The job went to Flatlands Tony. The teeth flashed and the idiotic grin played again across his face.

The hunt that ensued provides a rare glimpse of how the mob works when it really wants to flush someone out, when it throws its full weight behind an operation. Eaton had a yellow sheet—an arrest record—which meant that somewhere in the police files there was a photograph of him. A cop who was into a loan shark pretty deep, and getting deeper, was persuaded to pull the photo. His debt was promptly forgotten. Next, runners fanned out with his picture. "You seen him?" the parimutuel clerk at the racetrack was asked. "Well, let us know if you do." Eaton's face went all

over the city, up and down the networks, to fruit stands, gin mills, candy stores, bakers, barmaids, bookies. It didn't matter if you were mobbed-up or not—if you were a wise guy with any kind of connections, you looked for that face. Soon the FBI was looking for it, too, for word of the mob manhunt intrigued them. But the bad guys got there first. Eaton was spotted at last by the bouncer at an after-hours taproom in Canarsie, where he'd gone to slake his legendary thirst. A couple of the bouncer's boys followed him back to the walk-up a few blocks away, where he was holed up. The next day, police sources believe, Flatlands Tony paid a call on him. Their conversation was unproductive. As Flatlands left, pointing his car toward the Lincoln Tunnel and New Jersey, three hired guns entered. They gave him an hour. Then the noose went around his neck. They never had to fire a shot.

The next day at noon, NYPD Homicide records show, schoolkids on a lunch break peered into the rear of an abandoned trailer truck parked askew on Blake Avenue between Ruby and Drew Streets in the East New York section of Brooklyn, and discovered the body of Richard Eaton, forty-two, male white, missing more than a month. Eaton's frozen corpse was wrapped in a blanket, his legs bound with a cord, his arms bound with wire, no marks on his body, but a noose around his neck. The Kings County Medical Examiner concluded he'd been strangled. No fingerprints were ever found on the body, the blanket, the noose, or in the truck trailer, which had been reported stolen the day before from a neighborhood just a mile and a half away: Flatlands.

For a penny-ante racketeer, Eaton was as smooth as they come. He was a graduate of Notre Dame and spoke several languages fluently. The newspapers had no clips on him in their morgues and they didn't know who he was, so they dubbed him an "international wheeler-dealer," a "con man,"

a “lady’s man,” a “high-class hood,” a “courier of crime,” and other terms that came close, but didn’t really mean very much. To the FBI, Eaton was a man who moved money. Lots of it.

Agents said he was a paid courier instructed to move a few million dollars from Queens, New York, to Dade County, Florida. Agents said the money came from Building 261 on the night it happened. Agents said he got greedy, took too much of it for himself, and that was why they found him in Brooklyn with a noose around his neck. Agents also said the black address book found in his coat pocket contained the names of every prominent mobster on the East Coast, and the phone number of a man named Jimmy the Gent.

On the night of the Eaton strangling in Brooklyn, Flatlands Tony was seen by several witnesses in the audience at a Knights of Columbus benefit in Weehawken.

Then there were the disappearances. Ozone Park, Queens. January. Noon.

Thomas (Two-Gun Tommy) DeSimone, missing and presumed dead, could have been slain in any of a number of ways. G-men got three conflicting accounts. He was cut down in a volley of handgun fire, stuffed in a concrete drum, and dumped into the Hackensack River near Secaucus. “I guess he’s still there,” the informant said. But another source said he was clubbed to death, then buried on a farm upstate. And a third weasel said he was suffocated and laid out in the back of a rented car. No one knew. But that day they were hunting a corpse they couldn’t find, and so police opened nearly two thousand cars in the long-term parking lots at Kennedy Airport. The place is a favorite mob dumping ground, and the trunks have long been known to yield bodies. But this time all they found were spare tires.

NYPD Missing Persons Bureau records show it was noon that day when Thomas DeSimone, thirty-two, male white, also known as “Two-Gun Tommy,” borrowed sixty dollars from his wife, Cookie, and left the house on 116th Street in the Ozone Park section of Queens for the last time. He hasn’t been seen since. Very little else is known. The file is stamped “CASE ACTIVE.”

The DeSimone dossier describes a mustachioed felon who has been in and out of police lockups all his life. His arm-long arrest record reads like a “how-not-to” guide. First picked up for knocking over a liquor store when he was a kid, DeSimone went on to varied careers as fence, cargo thief, truck hijacker, labor racketeer, extortionist, bookies’ go-between, and strongarm man. And he did time for every one, for he wasn’t the smartest man who ever swindled a few bucks from a crooked union leader. He was often left holding the bag, or stuck with other people’s raps, and his blunders were so great, and so many people had scores to settle with him, that it was said he’d been living under the gunsight for years. Which made him a natural for a job that clearly outclassed him, where he could first be used, then discarded, consigned to death, robbed of his share and robbed of his life, and no one would complain in the morning. He was a natural for Building 261.

DeSimone was chosen as an inside man. On the night it happened, he barged into Building 261 with the other gunsels, wearing a ski mask. Once inside 261, he doffed his ski mask, apparently because he was perspiring, and the next day a witness poring over the many mug shots of Two-Gun Tommy singled him out as a dead ringer for the only man who’d shown his face. Now DeSimone was wanted by the law, and three times condemned to death by the mob: first, by his accomplices for the lesser jobs he’d mucked up; second, by top *capos* for the ski mask slip-up in the swoop, which had

to be paid back—as mistakes of such dimensions are always paid back—with a life; and third, by the man who had involved him in the plot in the first place, for that was the hidden price of his involvement. The same man who'd been his roommate at the minimum-security halfway house above Times Square where they'd served out their terms together. A man named Jimmy the Gent.

This time, Flatlands Tony didn't even need an alibi. No one questioned his whereabouts, and NYPD Homicide never entered the case. Under New York State law, if you don't have a body you don't have a murder, and DeSimone's body has never been found.

De Simone wasn't the only one to vanish without a trace. Hewlett Neck, Long Island. Just east of the Queens line. February. Time of day: unknown.

Martin (Little Marty the Bookie) Krugman knew they were looking for him, and he knew it wasn't going to be a social call. What he didn't know was when they were coming. His calling made him very visible—at certain times on certain days he called on certain taverns—and they could have plucked him off whenever they wanted him. But Flatlands Tony said to hold off; they were waiting for something first. Krugman was waiting, too, for Monday-night football, traditionally a bonanza night for the books. He knew he couldn't go into hiding and stay in town forever; it would arouse too many suspicions and they'd be bound to sniff him out sooner or later. It made more sense to take a windfall on the game, then blow town altogether. But for the first time in the season, Monday night didn't work out that way. It was a lousy line. The betting public bet onesided and made fortunes, that night, while the odds-makers took a bath. You couldn't feel too sorry for most of them, but for Krugman it was his last chance. He couldn't win on

the point spread and he was edged out of the middle, too, because no one would let him lay off anymore. The wise guys wouldn't touch his action this time because they knew he wouldn't be around long enough to make good on it. He was beat. He didn't have the cash to pay off, let alone bust out of town. He was stuck, and must have gone from bar to bar on his appointed rounds, looking at all the faces, wondering who would be his Judas.

The details surrounding Krugman's disappearance are a mystery. No one knows for sure what happened except the guys who did it, and they're not talking. Little Marty was well-fixed once, but died owing money.

Nassau County Police files reveal that it was somewhere en route from his $125,000 colonial home in exclusive Hewlett Harbor, Long Island, to the rented apartment in Queens where he ran his wire room that Martin Krugman, missing and presumed dead, mid-forties, male white, also known as "Little Marty the Bookie," was snatched. There are as many theories about how they disposed of the body as there are cops in Nassau, but not a single hard clue has turned up yet. As usual in these cases, said a Mineola detective, "nobody knows nothing."

Krugman, like Terry Ferrara, ran a men's hairstyling place on the Island as a legitimate sideline, but the pace was too slow. It seemed an unlikely coincidence that two beauticians would vanish during the same week from roughly the same place, so the FBI probed the "hairdresser angle," but got nowhere. Little Marty had agents intrigued. He would cut your hair, take your bets, or slit your throat—all for a price. A religious man who never missed the Jewish Sabbath, Krugman was also a "crossroader," the Vegas term for an electronic wizard who can rig the slot machines by rewiring them to make it seem that they've paid out more than they really have, allowing the casino operator to pocket the difference. It was the slots, in

fact, that lured him to Atlantic City, where he hoped to develop some promising new scams; but something intervened, and he never made it there.

What intervened, of course, was the job that night inside Building 261, as it would intervene somehow for everyone in the Queens mob, touching all their lives, leaving many of them lifeless. Little Marty was a small-timer, too small to be allowed to live with what he knew. But he made 261 possible, and so he had to go for the classic reason—he knew too much, and he had never proven he could be trusted with it, although he had also never proven he couldn't. It was said that Little Marty was bookmaker to a "degenerate gambler" who worked inside Building 261. It was said that the employee had unrestricted access to the high-value security vaults there. It was said he owed Little Marty $10,000, and if Marty was willing to forget the debt, and maybe come up with a little more…well, he had some very nice information to trade about the insides of Building 261 that would make a fortune for somebody. Little Marty liked the Plan, and he knew just who could pull it off. A few weeks before it happened, he was seen talking "heavy business" at several expensive Manhattan restaurants with a man named Jimmy the Gent.

It was said that Jimmy the Gent liked the Plan, too.

Brooklyn. Summertime. 3:00 A.M.

Paola (the Vamp) LiCastri was still looking for that big score, and he would die looking for it. Another man might have been content with his $100,000 share, but the Vamp wanted to be settled for life with still another hundred G's he thought was coming to him, and the day he tried to extort it from his own gang was the day he cashed his life insurance policy, and he

knew it. “This one doesn’t have to be clean,” Flatlands Tony was told. That was all he had to know. In the mob’s slightly askew way of looking at things, it is possible to show respect for a man even when you kill him; the Vamp would get no respect.

Flatlands picked three sites—for the snatch, the hit, and the dump. He was pleased with himself, and again that gleeful, toothy smile lit up his face. Then he drove upstate to a hotel near Monticello, and his boys did the rest. They grabbed LiCastri outside of a bar in Canarsie; that was the snatch. They tortured him until he dropped in an apartment in Bensonhurst; that was the hit. And they tossed his savaged remains into a lot in Flatlands; that was the dump.

About a week later, NYPD Homicide files show, a man walking his dog near the municipal garbage dump discovered the body of Paola LiCastri, thirty-one, male white, also known as “the Vamp”—last known address, Sicily—in a rubble-strewn lot at Crescent and Hemlock Streets, in the Flatlands section of Brooklyn. According to autopsy findings, the partially clad, shoeless victim had been doused with kerosene, burned with cigarettes, slashed with razor blades, then shot five times in the chest and head. No fingerprints were ever found.

The Vamp, an illegal alien, had done five years for murder when he was deported to Italy in 1978. The mob smuggled him back with a fake passport a few months later, and the law didn’t even know he was in town until they practically stumbled over his body. LiCastri, a convicted hit man, check forger, and drug runner, was part of the new wave of imported young hoods currently making their power play in the Mafia. Shipped across the Atlantic from the old Sicilian stamping grounds by aging mob patriarchs, they’ve taken over the best of the old rackets, and they’re moving in on others. Many underbosses, like slain Godfather Carmine Galante, prefer this new

breed to the home-grown ragtag because they're supposed to be well disciplined and quick to take orders. If so, the Vamp was an exception; he crossed the wrong crowd.

LiCastri was a so-called "contract worker." He would do a job for a flat fee—anything from fencing "ice" to murder—and somebody else would have to take his heat. That was all Building 261 was to him: just another job. He would do it, take his cut, then get out. That was before he knew just how big 261 really was, before he realized that none of the inside men could ever get out. The Vamp was the wheelman on the night it happened. He drove the getaway car and stormed into Building 261, wearing a ski mask. Everything went well. He got his money, made his getaway, and that should have been the end of that. It was only the next day that he learned in the papers how much he had stolen, how high the stakes really were. It was then that he demanded more cash and made the mistake that would cost him his life: he tangled with a man named Jimmy the Gent.

On the night of the LiCastri torture-killing in Brooklyn, Flatlands Tony was seen by several witnesses lounging at pool-side in a kosher resort in the Catskills.

It was the last of the murders. Or should have been.

With the Vamp's remains shipped back to Italy for burial, the bloody fallout from Building 261 came to an end. The mob wasn't exactly restored to tranquility—there was still the matter of the money to be resolved—but for a time, there was peace. Now you could worry about ducking the law, not about looking back over your shoulder all the time. There was still another man with a price on his head, but he was safely put away in jail. The crooks who had gone into Building 261 were in the catbird seat now, at least the

ones who were still alive. There were no more contracts, and no more hits. Flatlands Tony was well paid for his work, and quietly left town. NYPD Homicide had a lot of unsolved cases on the books that year. But they were used to it.

Flatlands Tony hasn’t been seen since, and the word on the street is that he will never be seen again. Somewhere along the line, the toothy smile played across his hard features one last time. Somebody was taking no chances.

CHAPTER TWO

Pantomime

"Some men are common gamblers;
I am an uncommon gambler."

Don Francesco Castiglia
(Frank Costello)

At 3:15 A.M. on Monday, December 11, 1978, at the Lufthansa Airlines Cargo Terminal, Building 261 of John F. Kennedy International Airport, in the borough of Queens, New York City, six ski-masked, gun-toting bandits pulled off the largest cash robbery in North American history. They burst through the most impregnable security cordon at JFK, short-circuited a sophisticated alarm system, handcuffed ten men, rifled the German airline's goods-laden vault room unhindered for an hour, and made off with exactly what they had come in to get—$10 million.

Everyone agrees it was the money that did it. Hoods became stoolies, innocents became jailbirds, cops became crooks. And every wise guy within the city limits wanted a piece of it. The money cast a spell that would turn some men into millionaires and others into corpses. It sent convulsions through the underworld. It explained why bullet-riddled bodies

started popping up in the trunks of cars all over Brooklyn. And it touched off a chain of fireworks so spectacular and so deadly that the Mafia here may never be the same.

Kennedy Airport is run by a ponderous administrative bureaucracy known as the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey. For reasons only the PA could explain, every building in its mini-fiefdom is assigned a number as well as a name. And so the Lufthansa Cargo Terminal came to be called Building 261. This gave rise to an absurd euphemism in the weeks after the building was hit. The FBI never called it a stickup; it was always "the matter of Building 261."

The bureau was baffled by the case, embarrassed because they couldn't solve it, couldn't turn up even a penny of the loot. To the feds it was always "the matter of Building 261," and the less said the better. To the press, forever in search of a good headline word, it was dubbed "the Heist." But to the mob, it was simply "the Job."

It was an inside job and a good one, carefully planned, flawlessly executed, in which the no-nonsense intruders pocketed even more than the British gang that stopped the Glasgow-to-London Royal Mail seventeen years ago. The Great Train Robbery netted a paltry $7 million. But the record haul from the $10 Million Getaway brought $8 million in unmarked, untraceable bills and $2 million in unregistered, unsecured jewelry into mob coffers. And it won six guys from Queens a place in the *Guinness Book of World Records*, perhaps forever.

The pounce itself was swift and professional. One employee was pistol-whipped, but no one was seriously hurt. The gunmen struck when most of the workers were in the cafeteria on a coffee break, just as they knew they would be, which saved them the trouble of rounding them up. With keys,

combinations, and the threat of death, the gang penetrated the inner sanctum.

It was perhaps the finest exhibition of banditry in the city's history. The tabloids went wild. It was "the crime of the century." The town was electrified by the Lufthansa holdup, and in the bars in the boroughs they talked of nothing else for days afterward. Eighteen months have passed, and not a cent has been recovered, not a gem has turned up at a pawnshop. The public still sees it as "the perfect crime," for that was how it started out. It ended a little bit differently.

A central question arises in all compelling mysteries: whodunit?

The first clue came five days after the heist when an undercover cop in a tavern in Queens spotted a familiar figure swaggering up to the bar, slapping backs and shaking hands all the way. "There's your man," someone whispered to the cop. "He just made a really big score." It was Jimmy the Gent. He looked over the joint as though he owned it, and in fact he once *had* owned it. He made a grand bow before the patrons, and even nodded gingerly toward the undercover cop, who had fooled no one. This was a big shot, a wise guy's wise guy, and everyone knew it. He seemed to have stepped out of the pages of Damon Runyon, and knew how to act the part, too. He took a fat roll from his pocket, peeled off a couple of fifty-dollar notes, tossed them disdainfully on the bar, and ordered drinks all around. "Let's have a drink on Lufthansa!" he thundered, as if he wanted everybody in Queens to hear him. To this day, that line is heard wherever wise guys meet. It was Jimmy the Gent, all right. That was his style.

James (Jimmy the Gent) Burke, forty-eight, ex-con, Bureau of Prisons number 96380-131, is a charming, swaggering rogue who calmly bought

drinks for his friends even as he stood at center stage of the largest manhunt in New York City history. And even as the kaleidoscopic backdrop of cops and robbers swirled all around him, he went methodically about planning the next job, oblivious, above it all, as if nothing extraordinary had happened to him. The FBI pursued him like a shadow. They knew they had their man, but to this day they haven't been able to prove it. They went after him with everything they had. But they came up empty-handed as Burke cursed into their wiretaps and laughed in their faces, put three bullets into an eavesdropping device, and bought a tall glass of milk for an agent who followed him into a bar. Stubborn, unflappable, arrogant, a fighter; that was Burke. He insisted on living the life he'd always lived, and he did it with style, even as a team of G-men doggedly trailed his every move, on foot and by car, with helicopters and single-engine planes, through gangland weasels and electronic bugs.

The NYPD closed in. The PA swarmed all around him. The DA paid him house calls. The FBI read his mail. The U.S. Customs Service recorded the serial numbers on every dollar bill he spent. Burke was the prize, the target of every ambitious law enforcement officer in the city. If hounded enough, they felt, he would eventually trip himself up. Burke never left town, never even went into hiding; that wasn't his game. They could have run him in anytime, but as much as they wanted him, they simply didn't have enough to hold him. They didn't have much more to go on than their own instinct, and instinct doesn't stand up in a court of law. So they reasoned that left to the streets and the neighborhood saloons of the south of Queens, and carefully watched, he would lead them at last to the booty and the other crooks. It was a plan that suited Burke fine. He did his best to ignore their intrigues, and went cavalierly ahead with his lesser rackets.

He was sitting on millions of dollars in cold cash and hot ice that belonged to Lufthansa, the German airline, but Jimmy the Gent would still book ten- and twenty-dollar bets on the basketball games. And he'd still give you a break on the point spread if he liked you, or even forget the vigorish now and then, just as he always has for as many years as a lot of people in Queens can remember. His friends put it bluntly: "Why should a few million dollars concealed beneath the floorboards change anything?" Burke is a cargo thief, a loan shark, a bookmaker, a labor racketeer, a saloonkeeper, a brawler, a horseplayer, and a regular at a dozen Queens bars…the same today as always. The only difference is that now he's a millionaire, too.

But Burke still walks tall in all his old haunts. The other day he had a hot tip on a speed horse in the seventh race at Aqueduct. The horse won, as Burke's tips often do, and a little while later he was in an old hangout, a joint near JFK where cargo workers from the airport, parimutuel clerks from the track, and mobsters from the neighborhood meet to drink, talk shop, and make plans.

It is said that a genuine wise guy cannot stay away from a scam. When the fix is in he'll jump at it, even if he never makes a penny from the deal himself. Sometimes the money doesn't matter. The sting itself, if successful, provides its own rewards; just having pulled it off is enough. So Burke returned to the old haunts and started fishing for a new score. It was here that he learned about betting coups at the Big A. It was here that he learned that Scandanavian Airlines had just received a precious shipment of rubies; that there was nothing good in Avianca but a couple of cartons of cheap booze and some canceled traveler's checks; that you better stay away from Pan Am for a while because they just appointed a tough new security czar. It was said that Burke kept tabs on all the airlines and always knew which

had the most in the till. How? There were ways of finding out. A lot of people in Queens, including cops, owed him favors; if he stumbled on one who didn't, he would offer ten percent of his action for the right information. And if it still didn't work, there was always the threat, backed by the knowledge that in minutes, with a phone call to the right place, Burke could summon all the muscle he needed. Muscle. In the end, that was his edge, the edge over the odds that every gambler dreams of.

So Burke went back. And whenever he did, the legend of Building 261 followed him. For a year and a half now, the refrain has been the same each time Burke blusters into one of his watering holes. "Let's have a drink on Lufthansa," someone will shout. Then Burke, bubbly, ebullient, always the extrovert, flings a fifty- or one-hundred-dollar bill toward the bartender and shouts for drinks for the house. The big haul from the Lufthansa job was also in fifty- and one-hundred-dollar bills, coincidentally or not, and the FBI believes that much of the cash Burke drops so carelessly on bars may actually belong to the Red Baron.

But it could also come from his bookmaking and horseplaying, one of his friends cautions, for in mob lairs throughout Queens, Burke has long been known as a high roller and a big spender, "no matter whose money it is he's spending." And he's happiest when he can talk loud and laugh loud and drink whiskey and take bets on the ponies.

The matter of Building 261 has its grisly side, as the proliferation of bodies shows. And every single corpse seemed to have the same distinctive stamp on it—the stamp of Jimmy the Gent.

As his victims piled up, so did the riddles. What was his name doing in Richard Eaton's address book? What was he plotting in the taverns with Gas Station Joey Manri? What did he learn over dinner with Little Marty the Bookie? What was he doing in the maximum-security pen in Atlanta

with Stacks Edwards? What was he doing in the minimum-security halfway house in Manhattan with Two-Gun Tommy? How had Flatlands Tony finally crossed him? All those people are gone now, and they were not run over by a truck. Who was this slippery little devil whose name seemed to be on all the bullets?

Queens-born and -bred, “Jimmy the Gent” Burke cuts an impressive figure. He’s tall, broad-chested, curly-haired, and tough. His apprenticeship in crime came as a teenager with the old “Westies,” a rowdy Irish street gang active in Woodside, Queens, and a midtown neighborhood known appropriately as Hell’s Kitchen. From there, his career skyrocketed. In time, he had the reputation of being the only person in New York with an Irish last name to get along in a big way with Italian organized crime in over seven years. He inherited that distinction from a shadowy underworld figure named Hughie Mulligan, a major bookmaker, briber of police officials, and murderer of federal witnesses, who passed away in 1973—oddly enough, of natural causes.

In the grand Mulligan tradition, Burke would use a none-too-subtle form of persuasion to get what he wanted before resorting to force. Once there was a restaurant he liked in Woodside, so Burke decided to become a restaurateur. The problem was that somebody else already owned the joint, and didn’t feel like selling. Burke had his crew in there every night with a simple injunction: “Look mean.” They put their guns on the bar, insulted everybody, bullied the waiters, glared menacingly at the help. Soon, most of the customers stopped coming and Burke took over. It was never even necessary to make good his threat. “I’d do anything to get this place,” he told the owner. “Even if I have to walk over six dead bodies to get in the front door.”

Jimmy the Gent's home is on the marshlands of Howard Beach, and his universe is the south of Queens. He seldom leaves it, except to go to jail.

Burke does his best work at places like the racetrack at Aqueduct, the cargo terminals of JFK, the bars of Ozone Park, and the smuggling piers of Jamaica Bay—all convenient meccas for Queens mobsters. Oldtimers treasure the image of Burke, banned from the track because he was bookmaking on the grounds and offering better odds than the tote board, yet still showing up every day at the Aqueduct parking lot, leaning against the fence and craning his neck for a glimpse of the horses as they came into the stretch run. His regular customers knew where to find him, and he would still take their bets.

An Irish godfather in an Italian mob, Burke used to boast openly that he had engineered over a hundred cargo thefts at Kennedy Airport. "I own that place," he'd boast. "There's nothing I can't do there." Burke would come to see the taking of Lufthansa as the greatest personal challenge of his career. This was not just another job to mastermind. To Burke it was an epic feat that pitted him starkly against the elements he knew best, as other men in other fields must once have thought of Everest, the four-minute mile, soloing the Atlantic.

The challenge meant a lot. A chance like this was years in the making and might never come again. But the bottom line, of course, was the money, a score to surpass even the white-collar pillaging of the liquid assets of the Franklin National Bank. Like all fast-livers, Burke must make a lot to spend a lot. A case can be made, in fact, that Building 261 was hit, that all those people were murdered, and that many more were jailed, turned into rats, or went on the lam to support the extravagant high rolling of one man—Jimmy the Gent.

But Burke wasn’t the only one who needed money. There was one gang of hoods that needed it if they were going to stay alive.

It must have been quite a reunion in Atlanta. Burke was the first to make the trip south on the old “Georgia Special,” but the rest of his mob would join him soon enough. They locked him up for shylocking—what the feds politely refer to as “extortionate extension of credit.” That was about six years ago, and in those days you could see Stacks Edwards out at LaGuardia, wearing his black chauffeur’s cap, waiting for the night plane from Atlanta so he could drive home the heavies who had been down to see Burke. Then they ran Stacks in on a “plastics” rap—trafficking in stolen credit cards—and he wound up in Atlanta. Two-Gun Tommy DeSimone went there, too, after he got in trouble over a cargo theft. So did a crumbum from the neighborhood named John Angelo Sepe, after they hauled him in for a payroll stickup.

It was here, fully three years before it happened, in the mess halls, rec yards, and cellblocks of Atlanta, that the earliest planning for Building 261 took place.

The New Yorkers had their own tables in a wing of the mess, apart from the other inmates. The Queens contingent had its own table at one end of the wing, slightly apart from the other New Yorkers. And the Ozone Park crew had its own section at the far end of the table, barely apart from the other Queens prisoners. There sat Jimmy the Gent, absolute ruler, lording it at the head of the table. It was a classic prison hierarchy. He wasn’t boss of the mess, or of the New Yorkers’ wing, or even of the Queens table, but in his own small circle, he was supreme. And like a princeling in exile, he marshalled his troops, laid his plans, dreamed of a triumphant return.

The return was triumphant, but at this stage the troops were second-rate. The people he chose for the operation were low-level hoods recruited to do a top-level job. There was Tommy DeSimone with his penchant for getting caught; there was Stacks, a lowly black operative whose mob alias is the term for a pile of chips in poker, at which he was an inveterate loser. And there was John Angelo Sepe, thirty-eight, Bureau of Prisons number 75983-158, a man who once bought a dog coat for a holdup, thinking it was a ski mask. Arrested fourteen times for burglary and convicted an average of once every four years over his lifetime, Sepe was not the shrewdest thug to come out of the Queens underworld. They were all losers, to be sure, but for Burke the trio was perfect. It was losers he wanted, at least for the moment.

It was convenient, after all. The four men were locked up in Atlanta together. They were old Kennedy Airport hands. And Burke knew their work. At one time or another, on one job or another, he had raided a cargo terminal with each of them. But there was a far more compelling reason to involve them: they were dispensable. It was the one part of the Plan they would never be told about.

Indeed, there would be no return engagements in the lives of Sepe, Stacks, and DeSimone after they took the final curtain call for Lufthansa. Two-Gun Tommy, tapped as one of the six ski-masked invaders of the Lufthansa blockhouse on the night of December 11, 1978, was murdered thirty-four days later, on the afternoon of January 14, 1979. John Angelo Sepe, another inside man, was jailed sixty-eight days later, on February 17, 1979, after surviving several attempts on his life. Stacks Edwards, who rented an apartment as a “safe house” for transferring the money just fifteen blocks from Building 261 and only five days before the raid, was murdered seven days after it, in his own place, on December 18, 1978. And Jimmy the Gent continued to run up staggering tabs in the saloons of Queens.

But that was a far cry from Atlanta. Interviews with penitentiary guards indicate that in the two years when their terms overlapped, the four men did little else but plot. “Who would have believed that whatever the hell they were talking about had a chance of getting off the ground?” says a former warden there. “We thought those guys were crazy. Acting everything out in the mess, pretending they were taking apart alarms or busting into safes, drawing maps and floor plans and God knows what else on paper napkins. We didn’t know what they were up to. Nobody did. Looking back on it now, I see they were practicing everything.” It wasn’t a dress rehearsal yet. Instead of dark clothing and stocking masks, they wore regulation red jailhouse jumpsuits and blue tennis sneakers. But they were getting there.

Sometimes Burke would talk animatedly about the Plan as his minions sat around him. “The real trick for any big job at the airport is to have the manifests in your hand a few hours before you go in. Advance manifests and bills of lading. It’s like the shopping list your wife takes to the grocery store. You know exactly what you want, and all you got to do is go in and pick it out. It describes the freight and puts a dollar sign on its worth, but if it’s worth anything at all, you got to figure the dollar sign is a lie because the bastards will try to trick you and get it through every time. So they say it’s worth less than it is on the manifests, but after a while you learn to read them pretty good. You can’t do a really big job without them—not at Kennedy, not in the cargo hangars. They got the registration numbers printed on the front and all you have to do is match them up with the same numbers on a carton somewhere in the Val Room. Once they match, you know exactly what’s inside without opening anything. Those places are huge. If you don’t have the numbers, you don’t know what you’re looking for and you end up smashing open a million cartons, but maybe you still

don’t have any more than a pile of lingerie after five hours when the next shift comes on and you’re caught.”

The lecture would go on until shakedown or until the bell sounded, ending the mess. “They get the manifests a few days ahead of time, and the bills of lading the day the plane comes in with the freight. Everything’s in triplicate and they only have to account for two of the three copies, so they usually don’t notice if one disappears on them. Once you get their paperwork, you figure you got no more than a few hours, in which case forget it. The airlines are no dummies. They know they’re sitting ducks and they don’t like to take chances. So if they have something really good coming in, they’ll have Wells or Brink’s or Purolator or somebody standing by to meet the plane and take the cash where it’s supposed to go. Otherwise it can sit in the vaults for a few days. In that case you’re practically home; all you got to do then is break in without touching off the alarm or getting shot by a guard, and leave without being seen!

“Even if there is an armored car waiting for the shipment, there are ways of turning it around empty so the money will still be where you want it. But you have to have your hooks pretty deep into the driver or the cargo supervisor to make them do that. It’s the same with getting the manifests in the first place. Somebody who works for an airline has to have a reason to give them to you. And you have to give him that reason.”

That was easy enough for Burke. If the man who had the manifest couldn’t be bought, he could be rattled.

Then there was the matter of the seals. “It’s easy to be tricked by them. As every cargo handler knows, the banks put seals on their cash packages so they can tell if they’ve been tampered with at either end. Some secret. So naturally, first chance he gets, the poor work slave is going to open the package with the seals on it, or else smuggle it home with him. Nine out of

ten guys on a job would do the same thing. If pressed, he takes the carton with the seals and leaves the ones with no seals alone. The banks caught on about two or three years ago and started shipping millions in boxes with nothing on them. Nobody would touch them. The money got through. And just for spite, the bastards sent tons of worthless packing material in cartons with five different seals on them, and those were the ones that got swiped. Forget the seals altogether when you go inside; they'll only throw you off. Concentrate on the manifest numbers."

There was also the question of international banking practices, at which Burke oddly fancied himself an expert. "You have to know which banks will square with you and which will do everything they can to screw you. The British play it straight every time. If they're shipping half a million dollars, it'll say "half a million dollars" on their stickers. The Jap banks you can never figure, because everything on their cartons is written in Japanese. But take it anyway because if it's U.S. dollars there'll be a lot of them, and if it's Jap money it's one of the easiest things to wash because it seems there's more yen than dollars in New York anyway. If it's an American bank moving cash overseas, watch out; they probably got every serial number written down somewhere. But if it's an Italian bank moving cash over here, you're home; it's probably beat-up old American bills from their tourist trade sent over here to be burned at the Fed, and those are never marked. It's yours. Just remember, on the carton they'll give the U.S. value in lire, and a million lire is worth almost nothing. It helps to know the conversion rates, too."

Finally, the German banks. "Nobody lies as much, or as badly. They do everything with a method, a precise method, but it's always precisely the same method every time, and once you figure it out you can beat them. It's a simple formula—if they're shipping one million U.S. dollars in fifties and

hundreds, the sticker on the package and on the manifest will say 16,000 U.S. dollars in tens and twenties. That way the weight adds up; it's exactly the same either way, and it could very well be a paltry $16,000 if you didn't know them any better. Different banks use slightly different ratios, but they're close. They underestimate the value of what they're shipping in order to confuse potential thieves. It never fails. As soon as they're hit, the Germans underestimate their losses once again in order to confuse everyone else. It works out better that way for all parties concerned.

"The banks don't want to look like suckers, so they'll never admit how much they were taken for. The airlines will never give them away because then they'd lose the banks' business. Even the insurers who have to make up the full amount won't say anything because they don't want their stockholders to learn how large their claims payments really are. The newspapers would go crazy if they knew it was one million dollars, but in New York, who really cares about a $16,000 theft? They don't know any better, so they won't say anything, either. And the cops won't come after you like they really meant it because if the papers don't cover the holdup, and there's no real publicity about it, then why should there be any pressure on them to find you? There's not. In fact, the only thing the banks want from the law is to aid in the cover-up, not to get their money back. They'd rather lose the million than have people think they were hit for any more than $16,000. They're very proud, those German banks. They'll absorb the loss before they'll admit they lost it. And that pride comes in handy when you rob them. It's one of the reasons you'll probably get away with it."

Burke's monologue was like a seminar in crime, but he meant every word of it. It was much more than the idle scheming his warders in Atlanta laughingly dismissed it as. He was planning, and planning big, and it would all come into play almost three years later, on the night of December 11,

1978, the night they raided Building 261. “And that’s how you take Lufthansa,” said Jimmy the Gent.

There were visitors in those days, big shots. They came to talk about the rackets, to ask for advice on certain jobs, cooperation on others, to give him messages from underlings or orders from superiors, and to tell him where he could collect his share when he came out of stir. A regular in the visitors’ cage was a squat little Brooklyn man who could always be found chomping on an H. Upmann cigar whenever he was flush. His name was Mr. Y. This was the link from Burke to the higher-ups, a complicated and well-screened chain of command that reached all the way into the opulent mansion of the Godfather of one of New York’s five Mafia crime families.

Mr. Y was a button man, an officially certified “made” mobster, something Burke, for all his money, power, and success, would never be since he was not of Italian ancestry. Mr. Y was also the personal emissary of one of the legendary names in New York crime: Paul Vario, Sr. Vario would do none of the planning for Lufthansa and take none of the risks, yet he would still reap most of the gains. According to NYPD intelligence sources and published accounts, he was as integral to the raid as was the back door into Building 261. That was what it meant to be a lieutenant in a big-city crime family. That was what “protection” was all about. There were some who would never understand the concept of giving most of your hard-earned money to a stranger somewhere, just so you could keep the rest in safety. Those were the ones, like Richard Eaton, who would be stowed untidily in the trunk of a car and left to rot on a street in Brooklyn.

It is said that Paul Vario Sr., sixty-nine, ex-con, Bureau of Prisons number 38524-192, didn’t exactly invent protection, but he did inflate the

percentages more than a little bit. In his heyday in Chicago, Al Capone used to get twenty-percent payoffs from everyone in his gang, out of rackets ranging from B-girls and slot machines to shylocking and gin running. Vario demanded fifty percent and usually got it. Or else. With an arrest record going back to the mid-1920s and convictions for contempt, income tax evasion, policy making, and buying detectives, Vario was another long-term veteran of the Atlanta lockup, where unusual amenities like television, Havana cigars, and women were apparently provided for him.

This elder statesman of the rackets used to operate from a trailer in a Canarsie junkyard before moving to Hollywood, Florida. A *capo* in a major crime family for over thirty years, Vario had been called the heir apparent to one of the city's mightiest mob fiefdoms, the family once headed by an early heroin importer named Thomas (Three-Fingers Brown) Lucchese, deceased.

Vario's specialty is Kennedy Airport, though he has also been known to dabble in truck hijackings in Brooklyn and Queens. But the goods-laden cargo vaults at JFK are his first love, and it was around these vaults that the pact with Burke was forged. It was an unholy alliance that would leave the FBI stumped time and time again, that would lead agents to knock at their doors whenever there was a job at the airport, and walk away from them even more confused than when they had first arrived. Vario respected Burke because he knew the rules and kept them, parcelling out a share of his rackets and being accommodated, in turn, by the Italian mob as no other Irishman ever was. Moreover, Burke never asked to meet Vario's boss.

Yes, Vario had a boss, too. He was the unseen power who ultimately made the Lufthansa swoop possible, according to sources on both sides of the law, even though he never met any of the principals. He was the one who finally ordered men killed, or at least approved their being killed, even

though for a long time, he didn't know what they had done wrong. He was the one who pocketed most of the money, then murdered the man who brought it to him. He was Antonio (Tony Ducks) Corallo, sixty-seven, identified in court papers as the venerable Godfather of a powerful crime family consisting of more than five hundred soldiers, the absolute boss of the garment district and Kennedy Airport.

Corallo's alias springs from his success in ducking convictions in all but a handful of his numerous arrests, usually with the aid of the highest-priced legal talent in America. Soft-spoken and gentlemanly, he is the prototype of the new businessman-mobster, a regular at the dining tables of the Waldorf and the private clubs of midtown Manhattan, where he is known as "Mr. Anthony Charles." But his vengeful streak is as ugly as they come, though he has the luxury of killing by remote control, through many screens, and from a great distance.

Tony Ducks, narcotics wholesaler, garment center loan shark, labor racketeer, briber and corrupter of public officials, was the man who ten years ago got his hooks into former New York City Water Commissioner James L. Marcus, a confidant of the mayor, who had come to him for cash to cover plunges on Wall Street. When he put the bite on Marcus, a whole array of crooked realty deals and rigged municipal contracts were set up, until an informant blew the whistle on the whole scheme and both men went to jail.

Marcus, who was once termed "Mayor Lindsay's right-hand man" in a *New York Times* profile, was "insidiously corrupted" by Corallo, as the prosecutor told the jury, according to the newspaper's account. The jury agreed, and it was because of his involvement with Corallo, in part, that the iron doors closed behind James L. Marcus.

Corallo still controls at least a dozen union locals, including several Teamsters branches with their highly fluid “pension funds,” and he was a close associate of Teamster boss James Riddle Hoffa. The feds believe he is one of only seven or eight people in the country who could find Hoffa’s body tomorrow if he wanted to. But naturally he doesn’t want to, and he’s not talking.

Tony Ducks runs his empire from a two-story brick mansion in Whitestone, Queens, ringed by bodyguards and torpedos twenty-four hours a day. He never goes out; in the grand tradition, he says, “I make the bastards come to me.” And they do—by the score. It’s not for nothing that with virtually no effort and literally no risk, Ducks and Vario would amass a good forty percent of the $10 million haul from Lufthansa.

If the scam takes place in their family they’re going to know it, whether it’s a headline-splashing job like Lufthansa or a hushed-up white-collar pinch. Then all they have to do is sit back and wait for their cut. Their cut means their blessings; it means they stay alive; it means their enemies don’t. So you couldn’t resent their share being so large and their contribution so small. If that was the game you played, it was one of the rules. Without them, the game was impossible. Without them, the raid on Building 261 would have been impossible. Protection was usually just a racket, but this time the stakes were higher, the cut was larger, and protection was really provided.

Ducks and Vario would get their loot, all right, but then “circumstances” would make them arrange the murders of most of the people who had taken it. It was then that they’d send signals down through the maze of the organization until Flatlands Tony was ready, and they’d put their full weight—some five hundred to six hundred men—behind the operation. Tony Ducks contacted Vario; Vario brought in Mr. Y; Mr. Y consulted another

button man; the button man buttonholed Flatlands Tony; and Flatlands Tony, smilingly drawing on a pool of several hundred available gunmen, killed Stacks Edwards and went casually on to the next contract. Six months later, when he was done with his work, Tony Ducks sent another message down through similarly convoluted channels. That was when Flatlands Tony himself disappeared, and the toothy grin was seen no more.

The labyrinth of pass-alongs was typical of the Mafia. The killings would be carried out, and neither the cops nor the victims' pals would be able to trace the killers. It was the way Tony Ducks worked, pushing buttons through a series of screens that insulated him both from the law and the vengeance of a dead mobster's brother, but kept him always within snatching distance of the money.

"The old man's interested in the airport," Mr. Y was saying one day long before it happened.

"So am I."

"The old man's interested in a job at the airport," Mr. Y went on. And he lit up another H. Upmann.

"So am I."

The old man wants you to knock over a cargo terminal there, a big one," Mr. Y delivered the command.

"So do I."

"The old man wants you to start drawing up the plans," Mr. Y continued.

"Tell him I already have."

"Who's it going to be this time?" asked Mr. Y, and for once he sounded genuinely surprised.

“Lufthansa,” said Jimmy the Gent, in a mock German accent. He spoke that day through the wire mesh in the visitor’s cage at Atlanta. “Lufthansa!” It was three years ago.

Mr. Y’s lips parted, and the H. Upmann fell to the ground.

CHAPTER THREE

Junk

It’s unusual when a Mafia family needs a motive for stealing $10 million. Usually they’ll just grab it and run. But the gang that commissioned the airport theft had an especially good motive for pulling it off—they needed the money to stay alive. They needed it fast.

From Atlanta, more than three years before the Lufthansa stickup, the scene shifts back to Queens, on the waterside, just a month to the day before the $10 Million Getaway:

A desolate marina on the Jamaica Bay shore. An abandoned fishing pier. Aboard a converted shrimp trawler. November 11, 1978, 6:43 P.M.

The owner of a mob-connected local marina on Beach 63rd Street in the Rockaways had been told it was a good idea to stay away that particular afternoon. Some people needed his place, and just to be sure, they gave him twenty bills with Benjamin Franklin’s picture on them, and told him to get lost. The radio signals had come in from the south Jersey coast two days earlier, and the barely seaworthy crate that would never be registered with Lloyds of London, that had been shipping water all the way up from South America, was due at its clandestine port anytime now. It was not a port where Customs would be standing around waiting to stamp everybody’s passport. Any fishing smack that made a nonstop run from Barranquilla,

Colombia, to a backwater jetty on an inlet near the marshes of Queens had come for one purpose and one purpose only. It was the route currently favored by the mob since traditional European, Turkish, and southeast Asian sources had begun to dry up. It was the Long Island Connection.

Stowed in the hull of the ancient trawler were twenty-eight tons of marijuana and ten million Quaalude tablets, along with several bags of cocaine and some ammunition. The cargo had a street value of $40 million. To buy the drugs, charter the vessel, install sophisticated radar-detection equipment, pay the crew of six for the passage, and stock enough pigs' knuckles to keep them happy, it cost about $1.2 million. It was the type of investment the mob found appealing, since it had a guaranteed rate of return of 3,330 percent. And the only ones to take the risk were a few Italian flunkies and a handful of Colombians.

According to an investigative report obtained from the Drug Enforcement Administration, one of the flunkies who helped arrange the drug shipment was John Angelo Sepe, the stickup man whose ski mask turned out to be a dog coat. Yet in spite of his record, or perhaps because of it, this hapless bumbler had continually been assigned walk-on roles in some of the most spectacular crimes in the New York region. He made several trips to Florida to set up the narcotics haul, and he must have cut a ridiculous figure as he discussed logistics with some of the smoothest people in the trade. With his blotched Levi's, tattered shirt, greasy hair, and scrubby mustache, he looked more like a drug addict than a drug smuggler, just as later, in Building 261, a witness would say he looked more like a cargo loader than a cargo robber.

A clumsy second-story man, Sepe was a jinx on any mission, and this one was certainly bungled too, though for once it wasn't his fault. Somehow the feds were tipped off in time to make a few blunders of their own. And

three months later out on Long Island, a woman named Theresa (Terry) Ferrara would die because of that tip and several others.

The trawler had been berthed for three hours, and mob stevedores were already unloading its precious cargo when the first alarm sounded. It was a Coast Guard cutter, guns raised, steaming full ahead. The gunboat came in with a tremendous clatter—engine spluttering, searchlights blazing, shotguns at the ready or fired in the air, and a bullhorn blaring, “This is a raid, stay on your ship! This is a raid, stay on your ship!” If the cutter had crept in at a slack pace, with its lights dimmed, under cover of darkness, the raiding party might have collared the smugglers. But with all that fanfare, at forty knots, and lit up like a Christmas tree, they didn’t have a chance. The smugglers sped off in waiting cars moments before Guardsmen boarded their craft. (At the inquiry which followed, the Coast Guard skipper claimed he was obeying a nautical ordinance that directs a ship not to proceed into a tidal basin against the ebb in darkness unless its lights are on. But the word at the “O” Club on Governors Island is that the raid was botched because their eminent colleague had watched too many Prohibition-era Jimmy Cagney movies.)

There were other foul-ups. The Coast Guard didn’t notify city cops of the raid until nearly four hours after it was over, and by then the smugglers could have been anywhere from Boston to Baltimore. The feds and local bulls have never hit it off in New York, so that’s not surprising, but even U.S. Customs, which was supposed to provide land support for the operation, never showed up. The reason is even more embarrassing: they went to the wrong address. Armed agents on foot were to hook up with Coast Guard invaders from the sea in a coordinated, two-pronged, land-and-water ambush that would leave the smugglers trapped with no direction to flee. But incredibly, the Customs men were misdirected to the wrong pier.

Instead of Far Rockaway in Queens, they went to Mill Basin in Brooklyn. It was a simple matter of the wrong 63rd Street. And as crack Customs agents swarmed aboard every vessel they could find, ransacking their hulls and frightening their owners, looking toward the water for the gunboat they were to rendezvous with, the hoods made a clean getaway in another part of town. Meanwhile, the Coast Guard, powerless on their $25 million cutter, without land transport, could only watch the dust their cars kicked up as they made good their escape.

The raiders found they had interrupted a picnic buffet. Strewn about the deck was cold beer from Cartagena, steaming coffee, pigs' knuckles, and sausage and pepper sandwiches. This ethnic repast gave police the only clue they would ever get about the smugglers—that they were Colombian blacks and Italians from Brooklyn and Queens. After that, the investigation came to a standstill; no arrests have ever been made.

In spite of the law's lapses, the damage had already been done. It was the biggest drug bust in East Coast history—the smugglers had managed to palm a few bags of cocaine as they fled, but everything else was confiscated, $40 million worth of high-grade narcotics. The $1.2 million investment had gone down the drain. Someone would have to account for it. Ordinarily, someone would have to die for it. And there was turmoil in the mob over what came next.

John Angelo Sepe learned what came next the following day when he was called to the table and told of the death threats. "You got one month to make up all the money you lost," said the boss of the table. "That goes for you and all your friends. Thirty days, no more, and if you can't do it by then,

you better go somewhere far away where they'll never find you because they'll be looking for you and looking hard. One month."

"But we didn't lose it," Sepe began. "I don't know how, but they were onto us before…"

"Thirty days," repeated the boss of the table. "No more. And it'll be 1.8 million."

"But you guys only put up 1.2 million. How can we…?"

"Interest," said the boss of the table. "The interest. Thirty days, no more."

In the end, that was all it took; now there were several lives on the line. For Sepe and his cronies had been given a rigid one-month deadline to recoup the mob's investment in the drug haul or face gangland execution.

How had the $1.2 million blossomed into $1.8 million? How had the death threats come down the line? And how had the $10 million Lufthansa heist staged by one crime family helped to offset losses—and save lives—from the drug-smuggling bid bungled a month earlier by another? It was a twisted scenario.

The rackets in New York have traditionally been divided up to minimize bloodshed. Antonio (Tony Ducks) Corallo took the airport and the old Joseph Colombo mob took the water-front. The late Colombo, who was cut down in Columbus Circle on Columbus Day, was succeeded by John (Sonny) Franzese, who maintained the waterfront connections so well that to this day his family has a virtual monopoly on the seaborne drug trade. Franzese, fifty-nine, convicted bank robber, Bureau of Prisons number 97239-182, knew what he had to do to keep the franchise. He was the one, police believe, who raised the $1.2 million for the drag run, passing it down

through intermediaries. And after the fiasco, he was the one who issued the threats, passing them down in the same way until they reached the level of mob gophers like Sepe.

The pass-alongs worked in both directions. If an associate had an idea for a job, he would tell it to the button man; if the button man liked it, he would bounce it off his *capo*; if the *capo* thought it had a chance, he'd discuss it with the underboss; and if the underboss said yes, he'd seek out the Godfather, the head of the family, in this case Franzese, for the final go-ahead. That was how the smuggling bid got off the ground. Money, commands, and, ultimately, death threats, flowed in the opposite direction. Each person in the chain was responsible only to the person directly above him, so when the job foundered and the promised profits didn't materialize, each person had a higher-up watching to insure he made good on the original investment. And then some.

It's a tried-and-true pattern, according to the thug-turned-gangland informant who supplied this account—the dominoes keep falling down, one by one. Franzese put the squeeze on his underboss, identity unknown. The underboss moved in on his *capo*, one Joseph (Joey Beck) DiPalermo. And it was DiPalermo who called the table and muscled Sepe. Somehow, the investment would be recouped, or it wasn't difficult to guess what would happen.

Franzese, who had put up $1.2 million, wanted $1.5 million back. That was his prerogative; who was going to argue? The underboss, who had to dig up that $1.5 million, wanted $1.7 million for his efforts. And Joey Beck, who had to float the $1.7 million, was demanding $1.8 million from Sepe. Poor Sepe had no one left to bully. The profits got smaller as they went down the line, while the personal liability got greater. Franzese would pocket $300,000, his underboss $200,000. Franzese couldn't be threatened,

his underboss wouldn't be. Joey Beck would make a mere $100,000, and while he was the one who passed the death threat on to Sepe, he had himself received rather poorly veiled hints in that direction, too. Sepe would make nothing—just a chance to stay alive and only thirty days to do that. And there was no one left for him to threaten except a few Colombians who had already vanished into the nether world of New York's illegal aliens.

So, as Franzese sat back, made threats, and waited for his money to come to him, the underlings in his outfit huddled to dream up a way to get him that money back and save their own skins. "You sure you don't know of anything big going on?" Joey Beck was saying. Well, yes, it seemed Sepe did know of something big, but it was a Tony Ducks operation out at the airport, the type he'd like to keep to himself, and…

That was all Joey Beck had to hear. Joseph (Joey Beck) DiPalermo, seventy-two, Bureau of Prisons number 85032-217, is believed to be the first man to have explored the South American narcotics connection. His criminal record dates back to 1928, when he was first convicted for murder; his underworld associations date back to the era of Lucky Luciano and Vito Genovese, and he has always been close to the highest echelons of organized crime. Joey Beck has a walk-up apartment in a tenement in Little Italy, a few doors away from the Elizabeth Street station house, and he has always had more than a nodding acquaintance with many of the top cops in the precinct. He was the man famed stool pigeon Joseph (Joe Cago) Valachi thought he was killing when he picked up a length of pipe in Atlanta and beat the wrong man to death. Joey Beck had been assigned to get Valachi, and Valachi thought he was getting his arch-enemy Joey Beck first. It was an important incident for the underworld, since it first brought "the secret society," or "the syndicate" as it was then known, into the light. Because Valachi had killed the wrong man, he talked, and he didn't stop talking until

he had exposed the inner workings of the mob. For the rest of his life, Joey Beck would have to listen to the black jokes from his cronies about how they'd all be better off if he had been killed instead, how if only Joe Cago had gotten the right man, it never would have happened.

It was perhaps typical of Sepe that he didn't mention the plans for Lufthansa until the last possible moment. Conditioned by a lifetime of losing, a lifetime of groping for that one big score, he figured it was best not to blow his chance to finally make it with the airport job, even though he could very well be dead before he ever had the opportunity to pull that job off. But now Joey Beck had a plan of his own. It was iffy. *If* the airport heist worked, *if* it worked within thirty days, and *if* he could get his hands on the proceeds from it, then he could make up the money from the drug run, get off the hook, keep Sepe and punks like him alive so he could get a bigger chunk of their action next time around, go back to his old scams, and live happily ever after.

The only question was what price Tony Ducks would ask. He wouldn't come cheap.

Valachi had once described his nemesis as "skinny and ugly," and indeed the hard features of Joey Beck have that look as they glare at you from the many mug shots he's posed for. He was an unlikely peacemaker in anybody's book. Yet in many ways he was a natural for the job. A survivor and infighter from way back, in his seventies and considered too old to be murdered, but feared and respected in his profession for the fifteen to twenty-five notches he had himself garnered, this was the man who had come to grapple with Tony Ducks.

The bodyguards looked him over. He seemed too lean and frail to be much of a menace; then the old man nodded and they let him into the baronial home. "It's a strange proposition I come here to make," said Joey

Beck as the two men embraced. “I already know it,” said Tony Ducks, and the rivals kissed, as only mobsters born in the first two decades of the century still do.

They went to a book-lined study, according to a police informant who supplied this account, and there, over a light meal of wine, cheese, and salad, they came immediately to business. “This money you want—almost $2 million, isn’t it?—we don’t have that kind of cash in the house every day and when we do, we usually have plans for it. You’re prepared, of course, to give up almost everything in the neighborhoods where your people and mine are stepping on each other’s toes. You’re prepared to hand over the policy banks and get out of the loans in the places I tell you. You know I will make you personally responsible to me for everything we decide today.” Tony Ducks was not asking questions. For him, these concessions were already certainties. And he would never stoop to talk of the numbers or shylocking; for him it was always policy and “the loans.”

Not only was Joey Beck prepared to hightail it out of certain rackets, but he had already drawn up a list of which ones were the most expendable. He brought out a map of Brooklyn and Queens and the two men pored over it greedily, like generals dividing up a territory. “You can have our oddsmakers in Canarsie,” he began grandly, “the few books we have left in Howard Beach, policy in Woodhaven, and our sharks out in Bush-wick and Ridgewood. They bring in a good $2 million a year and we’re only asking for $1.8 million, so in two years you more than double what you put up.”

Tony Ducks gave him a withering you-must-be-kidding look. “It’s no good, Joey, you know it’s no good.”

“But Don Antonio, how can you…?”

That must have been the tip-off. Tony Ducks had used the familiar form of address, as if he were still dealing with an equal. But Joey Beck had used

the term of utmost respect, like the supplicant he was. If there had been any doubt at the outset, there could be none now.

“What do you need the money so badly for anyway?”

“We’re putting together another big run from the South. We got burned on the last one, and we need this to get even.”

“You need this to stay alive,” Tony Ducks shot back. He didn’t waste any time playing his trump card, but he was right, of course. You couldn’t ask how he knew, how the head of one crime family had stolen the best-kept secret of another, but the mob has long had intelligence sources of its own.

Now he could dictate any terms he wanted, and knew it. “For starters, we’ll take what you offered us,” he said. He consulted the map again, pointing to the dotted line that was the boundary between the two boroughs. “Your people are leaning heavily on mine here, here, and here, and it’s gotta stop. Tell them to get the hell out tomorrow. Then we’re going to have part interest in some of those freight-trucking firms you still have out at Kennedy. We’ll pay you for it, of course, but you won’t do nearly as well as you did when you got into it in the first place.” This was a reference to the mob’s practice of taking over legitimate businesses when their owners defaulted on cutthroat high-interest loan payments to the sharks.

Tony Ducks was just warming up. “Next, we’ll take a piece of your scrap-metal dealerships on the Island and your private trash carters out in Jersey, and maybe that auto-salvage plant on the Gowanus as well.” He had done his homework well, and knew more about his rival’s tangled business dealings than the Internal Revenue Service ever would. “Auto-salvage plant” was another euphemism for an enterprise that was all the rage in the mob these days and more popularly referred to as the “chop shop.” Instead of stealing a $10,000 Cadillac somewhere in the city limits and shipping it

to the Dominican Republic, then selling it for $20,000 five months later, which might net you three-thousand dollars after all the intermediaries were paid off, the idea now was to steal it in Queens, strip it to its nuts and bolts in Brooklyn, then sell the pieces to a parts dealer in the Bronx twenty-four hours later at five times the profit. The chop shop had become the cornerstone of the modern autotheft racket, another money-making machine for Tony Duck's wide-ranging collection.

He was almost finished. "There's an election coming up at one of your waterfront locals in Red Hook. We don't want to control the thing. We couldn't—your unions are too solid. But I'm going to run a candidate for secretary and maybe one for business agent or treasurer. You make sure he doesn't have any trouble winning."

This was the man of whom a Congressional report had once said, "Mr. Corallo is a gangster who gravitated to the labor movement for no other reason than to steal from it."

Joey Beck was silent for a while. So that was the price. He could lose either way, in getting his crew to give up some of their best rackets or in a reckoning with Tony Ducks—who would hold him "personally responsible"—over why they wouldn't. "You're asking us to just hand over more than ten million in business a year when all we want in return is $1.8 million in cash? Even our best shylocks don't charge more than a hundred percent."

"Look, $1.8 million in paper can be worth many times more than ten million in promises and talk. Especially when you need the paper as badly as you do. Me, I take my chances on the talk; I can afford to. But be realistic, how much of that do you figure I'm ever going to see? I got to gamble, too, you know. Anyway, I don't have time to sit around all day and negotiate. Take what I offer or take nothing. It's either that or some fancy

kid with a college degree will dig you up ten-thousand years from now and wonder what the hell you were."

It's revealed by mob contacts that Joey Beck accepted the deal in the mansion that day. He really didn't have much choice. And so, like nations nearing a disarmament pact or parties to a corporate merger, the two men came at last to what might be called an "agreement in principle." Later, mob "rabbis"—those high-priced lawyers who prefer clients who pay in cash—would haggle over dollars and cents, swap ownership papers, and thrash out the thornier details, but for now it was set. Or almost.

"There's just one other thing," said Tony Ducks. "If it doesn't work in Lufthansa, if there's no money or my crew gets caught on the inside, I still hold you to everything we discussed today. You understand? Of course you do. Otherwise it's all off and you can take the consequences by yourself. And remember, I'm holding you personally responsible for everything."

Joey Beck didn't have to ask what that meant.

The newspapers called it a "deal with the devil." But it was unclear whom they meant by "the devil," since neither mobster was ever very likely to have sainthood conferred upon him.

They made strange bedfellows, those two crime families. They almost never worked together; when they did, each feared the double cross, and with good reason. Tony Ducks was happiest at the airport and in Queens, while Joey Beck and his people preferred the waterfront and Brooklyn. Whenever they overlapped, there was trouble in the best of times, bloodshed in the worst. Only a lowly hood like Sepe could ever work for both families.

But as uneasy as the alliance was, it lasted just as long as it had to—until the night of December 11, 1978.

That was the link between the biggest drug confiscation on the East Coast and the largest cash holdup in U.S. history. The seizure was made November 11. The money had to be made up in thirty days or the smugglers' heads would roll. And the Lufthansa job was pulled on December 11 so they got in just under the wire and escaped with their lives. The old Colombo family lost big narcotics money on a forlorn smuggling pier in the Rockaways; the Tony Ducks mob was commissioned to get it back for them in Building 261—and did, at a price.

That run-down jetty in Queens where the bust took place looked directly out across the bay to the runways and aprons of Kennedy Airport, where the tarmac shimmered just a mile or two in the distance. The action would shift here next.

There was one last bizarre footnote to the Long Island Connection. In a brazen midnight raid on a bonded warehouse in Brooklyn a few months later, masked intruders strongarmed their way into a safe room used by the Drug Enforcement Administration to store contraband narcotics before they were either burned or introduced as evidence. The gunmen crammed a rented van to the roof with bags of cocaine, crates of marijuana, and potato sacks filled with Quaaludes, abandoning the van a few blocks away after transferring the goods into a waiting truck. Estimated street value of the haul—$10 million or more. Two facts emerged in the course of the investigation: the stolen drugs were part of the shipment seized aboard that shrimp trawler in the Rockaways, the gang that successfully engineered the

junk heist was the same one that had foundered miserably on the drug-smuggling bid. They simply stole the goods back.

And they gloat about it still: “The feds snatched the stuff from us first, remember. All we did was snatch it back. Their mistake was they didn’t burn it fast enough. Too much paperwork or something. Well, it was an invitation, so what else could we do? Poor bastards.”

But there’s at least one *capo* who’s not so sanguine these days. Joey Beck is still smarting over his losses, presiding as he does over a vastly shrunken empire ever since he made his deal with the devil. If only he’d learned where the drugs were stored sooner, if only he’d staged the warehouse raid faster, he wouldn’t have had to rely on Lufthansa to get him out of his hole. Mob-watchers say that overnight Joey Beck has come to look his seventy-two years, and suddenly his behavior borders on senility.

“The bastard,” he’s been heard to mutter whenever someone mentions Tony Ducks by name. “The bastard.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Insiders

“In the case of Heathrow I owe a great deal to Wordsworth. For a time he acted as a loader here. He left when there was some trouble about a gold consignment. Nothing was ever proved against him, but the whole affair had been too impromptu and disgusted him. He told me the story. A very large ingot was abstracted by a loader, and the loss was discovered too soon, before the men went off duty. They knew as a result that they would be searched by the police on leaving, all taxis too, and they had no idea what to do with the thing until Wordsworth suggested rolling it in tar and using it as a doorstop in the customs shed. So there it stayed for months. Every time they brought crates along to the shed, they could see their ingot propping open the door. Wordsworth said he got so maddened by the sight of it that he threw up the job. That was when he became a doorman at the Grenada Palace.”

Graham Greene.

Travels With My Aunt

As Jimmy the Gent approached Building 261 from one direction and the junk-smuggling ring headed there from another, a couple of very bored, $15,000-a-year cargo slaves came to the same place from a different route entirely: the inside.

Peter O. Gruenewald, forty, a German national, on the payroll of the Federal Witness Protection Program, has been given a new face, passport, and identification and relocated out of New York to shield him from mob justice. He was a trusted Lufthansa cargo agent for fourteen years. Current employment status: suspended.

Louis Werner, forty-seven, a lifelong Queens resident, Bureau of Prisons number 10880-158, is today serving a sixteen-year sentence for robbery in lower Manhattan's Metropolitan Correctional Center, a facility otherwise known as the "Foley Square Hilton." He was a trusted Lufthansa cargo agent for eleven years. Current employment status: terminated.

Gruenewald and Werner were companions in the pleasures life holds out for cargo slaves—the wife on Monday night, the mistress on Tuesday night, bowling on Wednesday night, drinking on Thursday night, poker on Friday night, television and kids on the weekend, and shopping at the bookies for points every day of the week. It was exactly this drudgery they wanted to get away from, but it took them nearly four years to figure out how.

Wednesdays were their nights to conspire. That was when the Lufthansa bowling team squared off with the teams from Pan Am, TWA, Qantas, Air France, Avianca, British Airways, and the Flying Tigers in a league that included the biggest freight carriers at JFK. The weekly matches were held in the bowling alleys of Lawrence and Massapequa, Long Island, not far from the airport and the Queens line. Between frames and between games, Gruenewald and Werner would retire to the bar to dream and plot. They made quite an odd couple, the German quaffing beer at an alarming rate, the

Queens man downing shots; the one with his immaculately pressed three-piece suit, thick hair, thick mustache, thick accent, the other trying almost too hard to look like a wise guy, casual in dress, lanky in build, awkward and slovenly in appearance. They were waiting for their chance.

The first time it came was but a foreshadowing of what would happen next, though it whetted their appetite for the real thing. That was on October 8, 1976, at 9:57 P.M., Building 261, Kennedy Airport, when Louis Werner suddenly realized he had the opportunity the men had jawed about for months. It was a take-the-money-and-run chance. He found himself alone in the Val Room with a small cardboard box filled with $22,000 in foreign currency, readily swiped, easily concealed. So Werner pulled a “glom,” a spur-of-the-moment snatch, in the idiom of the airport. He hid the money in the men’s room and picked it up when he finished his trick. That night, just after midnight, he showed up at Gruenewald’s Levittown home with a brown cardboard box bearing the Lufthansa sticker and freight marked “Quito, Ecuador.” Gruenewald set off immediately for the nearest garbage dump—“the safest place to hide something,” he said—and left the $22,000 beneath the old furniture and empty bottles. This was his first adventure in grand larceny, and after depositing the money at the dump, he went home for some fitful sleep. He returned there the next morning to retrieve the dirtied box and drove to meet Werner at a gas station. The men stuffed the money into Macy’s shopping bags, tore the eighteen-by-twelve-by-eight-inch box into tiny pieces, and spent most of the day driving around to various shopping centers on the Island, dropping the shreds of evidence into hundreds of garbage cans. Then Gruenewald, waiting again for the dead of night, buried $22,000 worth of Canadian and Australian dollars, French and Belgian francs, Swedish kroner, and Italian lire in a hole in his backyard.

Here the money moldered for over ten days as the two amateurs tried to figure out what to do with it.

At last they found a money-mover to wash the bills and exchange them for dollars. But after he excised his chunk of plunder in laundry and currency-conversion fees, Werner's share was only $8,000, Gruenewald's just $5,000. It was fleeting relief at best from the combined rigors of supporting a family and three bookmakers a day.

Later, in court, Gruenewald said they had resolved never to deal in such small potatoes again. He admitted he was extremely nervous at the time, and did not think his $5,000 cut was worth so much danger and apprehension. "I told Lou not to bother me anymore with any money of this kind," he would say. "I told him I wouldn't put my job in jeopardy because of a lousy $5,000. Werner agreed completely, and so we started to talk about more money and we spoke about more money and it went really big money. I even mentioned to him it has to be in the neighborhood of a million dollars—one million dollars.

"We started to think about it. I said it would have to be a million. I thought about it and Lou thought about it too, and we started to plan a big heist. We knew Lufthansa always stored millions and millions in the Val Room, and it was for us pretty attractive. We talked frequently about a big heist, every day at work, every Wednesday at the bowling alley, and by the New Year, 1978, we had a Plan."

It was a Plan, as Gruenewald put it, "to make a robbery."

How could he have known then that other people were already zeroing in on the same target? But he'd find that out soon enough. "It was a good Plan," he says now, almost wistfully. "And it would have made us a good robbery too. Much better than the one they made. If only…"

To the cargo workers on the payroll of the Red Baron, Building 261 at Kennedy is divided into an “upstairs” and a “downstairs.” It’s a class distinction, that flight of stairs, every bit as much as a physical boundary. Upstairs are the office and the desks and the air-conditioning; downstairs are the cargo racks and the vault rooms and “the stuffiest warehouse in the world.” Upstairs the higher-salaried, white-collar employees push pencils; downstairs the lower-paid, denim-clad workers push dollies. Upstairs they wear three-piece suits and don’t like to get their hands dirty; downstairs it doesn’t matter what they wear, and if their hands aren’t dirty it’s because they’re loafing. Upstairs are the paperwork, invoices, and bills of lading; downstairs are the physical goods, the parcels, boxes, cartons, and containers. Upstairs was Gruenewald, downstairs was Werner.

The personnel files of Lufthansa list Gruenewald’s occupation as “air cargo traffic manager,” Werner’s as “freight transshipment supervisor.” It was unusual for the two men to socialize. The German management, in fact, actually disapproved of it. They preferred their people to hang out with their own kind, and usually they did. The bowling league, for instance, was a “downstairs” phenomenon, an Americans-only affair; the “upstairs” crowd, most of them German-born, urbane, already had their own klatches. So Gruenewald was a “defector” as far as they were concerned. He sat in the employees’ cafeteria with those roughnecks downstairs, actually went bowling with them, and adapted their ragtag ways.

There was a reason, even a good reason, that management—men with names like Eirich, Preiditis, Bierschwale, Winkler, Jaroslav, Keybl, and Rolf Rebmann—actively disapproved of friendships that transcended that flight of stairs. The classified papers from upstairs pooled with the know-how from downstairs were all it would take to “make a robbery.” And of course, that was exactly what Werner and Gruenewald set out to do.

Gruenewald's job called for him to check the weight, balance, and loading schedules of the cargo planes. It was all paperwork, and he never had to leave the office to do it. With this, he had in his hands each day a list of every item placed aboard every Lufthansa freight carrier—anything from Mercedes automobiles to circus elephants to green canvas satchels containing millions of dollars. Werner's job, just sixteen fateful steps below, called for him to oversee the movement of goods into and out of the Val Room. Every day he knew what was coming and where from, what was going and where to, and what the dollar value was. Gruenewald had a good overview of the whole operation and could even see a few weeks into the future as far as cargo was concerned; Werner couldn't be beat on his day-to-day knowledge of where the money was and how to get it out.

The Plan they drafted, Gruenewald would later say in court, would make that $22,000 look like "loose change."

It was an ingenious Plan. They had a reason for picking the season, the month, the day, the time, everything.

The robbery would have to be in the winter. This was necessary because the workers were issued "international orange" jackets for use around the cargo hangars only at that time of year. The jackets were bulky and fluorescent, so anyone wearing one would stand out. This would make the robbers' work easier when they went to round up the help.

It had to be close to Christmas, for nothing was more tempting to a cargo thief than the sight of a goods-laden Val Room in the Yuletide, with all the presents wrapped in little boxes and spread out at his feet. There were more jewelry and money passing through the terminal in the month of December than there were at any other time of year. And the individual carton was never more vulnerable; the shippers were so eager to see that it

reached its destination in time for the holidays that it was often poorly secured, truthfully labeled, unsealed, and easily accessible.

The assault force had to strike on what was known as “Sunday lobster,” the midnight to 8:00 A.M. shift on what was actually Monday. No cargo planes came in at that hour, so there were very few workers on hand. And it had to be around 3:00 A.M., because most of the short staff would be in the cafeteria on their lunch hour then.

The second or fourth weekend of the month was suggested because that was when a regularly scheduled cash shipment of $500,000 could be counted on as a kind of bonus in addition to whatever else happened to be lying around.

Certain aspects of the Plan seemed absurdly childish. If an armored truck came to pick up the money before the bandits had come to take it away, Werner, who had to sign for the shipment, would claim he had diarrhea and disappear into the bathroom until the truck left.

If it was a full moon on the night of the robbery, the whole operation would be shelved.

The crooks would feign ignorance about the complex workings of the alarm system to make it look as if no one had described it to them. Later, in court, when Gruenewald was the chief prosecution witness testifying against Louis Werner, who had been his best friend, that aspect of the Plan would emerge:

> The Witness: We decided to tell the people who make the robbery exactly about the alarm system, but they should act like they don’t know anything about it.
>
> Q: Could you explain that?
>
> A: If the robbers knew about it exactly, it would be obvious somebody told them from the inside. We wanted to

avoid that.

Q: They were to make believe they didn't know about it?

A: That is correct.

Q: Even though they did know all about it?

A: That is correct.

That was Gruenewald's handiwork, all right. It was a Plan designed with Teutonic thoroughness, though it was couched in Teutonic abstractions. While Werner's role was to provide the sketches and information needed to put the quietus on the security system, it was Gruenewald who concocted the grand strategy.

According to the Plan, invaders would be "recruited," employees "overcome," alarms "defused," and property "seized," all to "accomplish this event." Two vans bearing six gunmen would arrive to decommission the alarm system and haul off the plunder. They had to have two vans because there was such a wealth of goods stored in so many bulky cartons that one van wouldn't be enough to take it all away. The crooks would then walk upstairs rather than take the elevator, to avoid ringing a telltale bell. Then they would check the bathrooms and immediately start "overcoming" people. They would "overcome" one person on the ground floor, they'd "overcome" the workers in the warehouse and those in the cafeteria, and they'd "overcome the old man who waxes the floors." Then they'd lure a supervisor to an office by forcing another worker at gunpoint to page him to come upstairs and take a long-distance phone call from Germany, where he too would be "overcome."

They'd go on to "overcome" one final man, handcuff all the employees together, scoop up the money, and bolt.

"Gruenewald has the voice of one of Rommel's tank commanders," wrote New York *Daily News* columnist Jimmy Breslin after spending the

day in court. “One waited for him to follow all this by saying, ‘Then we must overcome Tobruk.’”

There was just one problem with the Plan: they needed six robbers to pull it off.

For months, the two airport workers had the textbook theft, but no one to do it. They were grand architects who’d envisioned a master plan, a treatise in crime, but it was all a fruitless academic exercise unless they got the mob to make it work. They needed someone with hot-line links to union bosses and Mafia chieftains at Kennedy Airport, someone who could obtain permission or “sanction” from the higher-ups and then deliver them their share, someone who could touch all the bases and grease all the palms and satisfy all the egos in organized crime so the planners wouldn’t be found floating in a cement life jacket in Jamaica Bay the day after it was over. They needed someone who could oversee all the logistical details of the heist—the supply of manpower, guns, stolen cars, handcuffs, ski masks, burglar tools, “getaway money,” muscle, and other hardware.

They needed someone like Jimmy the Gent.

Jimmy the Gent. To Werner, it was just a meaningless monicker he’d heard whispered in the warehouses. To Gruenewald, it was a name without a face that he’d heard bandied about the bars. To the cargo workers better versed in crime than they were, it was the stuff that legends and successful robberies were made of. And finally, to the two men, deeply absorbed in one of their bowling-alley huddles, and getting deeper in debt to the books, it came to be the solution to their problem.

So they embarked on an absurd mission—to locate a man they knew only by his alias, whose last name they didn’t know, whose face they

wouldn’t recognize, and whose whereabouts were a mystery, and to ask him politely to help them rob their employer of $10 million. The only thing they had to go on was a colleague’s description: “He hangs out in the south of Queens and drinks a lot.”

Gruenewald and Werner had, of course, the handicap of not being sophisticated enough to know any wise guys who’d ever dared a deed riskier than the violation of the gambling statutes. It made assembling a holdup team difficult. They’d only just learned how to steal, and most criminal circles were still closed to them.

Their preposterous attempt to enlist Jimmy the Gent was doomed from the start. They would blunder into the saloons around the airport and, after a round of drinks, approach the bartender or one of the hard-eyed regulars and demand, “Any of youse guys seen Jimmy the Gent in here?” The response was generally the same: “Jimmy who?” or, “Jimmy the what?” To which Lou Werner would reply in his best John Wayne drawl, “Tell him we’re looking for him.”

They tried hard to sound like toughs, but they weren’t tough enough to pull it off. They were just a couple of guys from the neighborhood, street guys, and everyone knew it.

They were laughed out of every joint they stumbled into, but the word did reach Burke: a couple of “big-talking boys from Lufthansa” had been around asking for him. Mr. Y brought the message down, for Burke was still in jail at the time in Atlanta, something Werner and Gruenewald couldn’t have known.

Burke could only chortle. That wasn’t his style at all. Nobody at the level of those two amateurs would enlist him to do a job. If there was a job to be done, he would do the enlisting for it himself. Later, when the time was right and the circumstances were different, and there were no prison

bars in between, he would send for Lou Werner and perhaps they could do business. But no cargo punks with German names would ever send for him, that much was clear.

Mr. Y nodded. He extinguished the H. Upmann against the metal mesh of the visitors' cage and left the room. The message came back up North: "Let the two men stew."

Having thus been given the bum's rush, Werner and Gruenewald tried another tack. They divided up a list of twenty airport saloons and began combing them for characters sleazy enough to "make a robbery." It must have seemed an extraordinary recruitment scheme—the next step, presumably, would be advertising in the "help wanted" sections of New York's three daily newspapers—but the two men were not easily derailed from their goal. There was an added incentive to their plotting: Werner was getting into big trouble with his battery of bookmakers. He owed a total of $15,000 to three of them, and it was too big a debt for him, much too big. One of his creditors, a stunted character known locally as Little Marty the Bookie, was even starting to make squawking sounds, and experience had taught Werner they'd be followed a few days later by threatening noises. So the pair stalked area watering holes with a vengeance, in a bid to round up the prospective robbers.

It was the beginning of what would emerge in court as "the episode of the mysterious Brian."

The recruitment drive took Gruenewald to a place called The Owl, which he frequented almost every day anyway. Here, at 145-88 New York Boulevard, in the Springfield Gardens section of Queens, seven blocks from JFK and a mile from Building 261, he found a "connect" man at last, according to court papers and trial transcripts. In New York, with its something-for-everyone specialization, there were bars for fish workers and

meat packers, labor negotiators and hotel doormen, risk arbitrageurs and wire clerks on the Amex. The Owl was the place for cargo workers and, according to crime and law-enforcement sources and the author's own observations, mobsters who had something to gain by fraternizing with them.

From the aerie of The Owl, Gruenewald happened upon a man he would know only as "Brian," a shady and mysterious character who was quite receptive to the invitation he received to take part in grand theft. It was September, 1978, and Brian talked like he had a holdup team all dressed up in ski masks and dark clothing and waiting in the next room. It wasn't just the whiskey talking, either. At their next meeting in another Queens bar, he produced five other men from various nooks and crannies of the tavern and told Gruenewald that this was the sextet that would take Lufthansa. It was the type of spectacle you'd never believe if you saw it in the movies—the Pan Am cargo handlers at one end of the bar, the loaders from Emery and Flying Tigers at the other end, the hookers in their wigs prancing up and down, and the bartender keeping the drinks flying and the ashtrays empty as seven men seated in the back room under pictures of Kelso and Ruffian and Foolish Pleasure and the other great horses discussed how best to hit Building 261 for untold millions.

"It'll be just like child's play," boasted the ethereal Brian. And then, mixing his metaphors, "as easy as taking candy from a baby."

Later, in court, when Gruenewald "told all" in his new role as star government witness, the hopeless absurdity of what he'd attempted would surface under a defense attorney's incredulous cross-examination:

> Q: This Brian, a man you knew only three or four times, he proposed to rob your employer, is that correct?
>
> The Witness: That is correct.

Q: And your meetings with him weren't even arranged, you just happened to run into him?

A: That is correct. Just happened to run into him.

Q: And you knew him less than forty-five minutes when your conversation first turned to robbery?

A: That is correct. About half an hour.

Q: But you trusted him completely to rob your employer and give you your cut of the take?

A: That is correct. You see, we needed the money very badly.

Where could Brian be found? "In the bar," was all Gruenewald would say. What was Brian's last name? "I only know he has a long Polish name which started with a V or a W. I don't recall the rest of it." Who were Brian's accomplices? "One went by the name of Joel, another was known as J.J.; the last names I never knew, the others I don't remember." Where could they be found? "In the bar."

It's all there in the thousands of pages of trial transcripts recorded in the Eastern District Federal Courthouse in Brooklyn. Gruenewald had the prescience not to give Brian all the details of the alarm system for fear he would act without him. But as it happened, it didn't matter anyway. This approach to Building 261 was simply too comical to work, and by October, 1978, as Brian's "enthusiastic" promises dissipated, Gruenewald "grew disenchanted" and "fired" the bunch of misfits he'd recruited. It was the last of the nebulous "Brian."

Werner had been staying clear of the meetings in The Owl. He didn't want to know who the would-be robbers were and he didn't want them to know who he was. He figured it would be safer that way. All he wanted from the score was $200,000 so he could be settled for the rest of his life.

When Gruenewald decided he didn't like the caliber of his troops and Brian flitted across the crowded stage of Lufthansa for the last time, Werner was the first to find out about it. In the bowling alley that Wednesday night, two months before it happened, the men commiserated over their losses. "I guess we were in too deep," said Gruenewald. "Way over our heads," said Werner. "It really wasn't our game," said Gruenewald. "Let's cash the whole thing in," said Werner. And with that, the Plan should have come to an end.

All the methodical, step-by-step Teutonic plodding in the world couldn't produce six bandits. The haphazard, liquored-up approach couldn't do it either. This pair had a long way to go in figuring out how to steal. In the end, the Plan had to be scrapped for want of the bad guys. At least Gruenewald thought it was scrapped.

After they sent Brian packing, the two men went back to the routine of their pinched lives: bowling and the point spread. There was always the hope of another "glom." In the meantime, Werner had solved the problem of paying back his bookies, and now he could worry about paying back his shylocks instead. He could also return to haggling over points with Little Marty. The Plan was finished, and in October it seemed just as well.

Two months passed.

Nothing had changed. The Plan was still dead.

Gruenewald was home asleep, "just 19.8 miles away," he would say ruefully.

The clock radio clicked on at 7:45 A.M. sharply. He rolled over in bed, but the newscaster's voice had an urgency to it that would not let him go back to sleep. The voice told him that his cherished Plan had been stolen by

his best friend and executed to the letter by strangers as he slept. It told him that his place of business had been hit just as he had always envisioned it could be hit. It told him he deserved millions for his creativity, but that he'd be lucky if he ever saw a farthing of it. And it ultimately led him into a court of law to testify against Lou Werner.

It was the voice of WINS—"Ten-ten on your radio dial…all news, all the time"—and it came in broken by static, as it sometimes did when there were flash dispatches from the street. "…And nobody knows for sure just how much was taken in that daring predawn raid at Kennedy Airport. The FBI says $2 million, the Port Authority police say $4 million, the city cops say $5 million minimum. How much maximum? That they won't say. So far Lufthansa hasn't said anything, but they've promised to break their silence soon with an eight o'clock press conference, and we'll be there to cover it live from the scene of the heist at JFK's Building 261 when they do. It looks like a big one, maybe the biggest this town has ever seen. Stay tuned…"

Gruenewald must have felt like smashing that radio into a million pieces.

Lou Werner had been very busy those two months.

And now Gruenewald came after him with all the wrath of the starving artist who sees his stolen portraiture with somebody else's signature on it through the picture windows of the most exclusive gallery on 57th Street.

"You have deceived me," he began with remarkable understatement and politeness. "You have double-crossed me." Then, matter-of-factly, "You will pay."

Later, as he sat in court, Gruenewald was asked by a reporter how he felt after the fact of the robbery had begun to sink in. He tumbled over his syntax to find the right answer: “I was a little, not a little bit, I was a very bit upset about it, not even a very bit, I was so greatly upset so much about it that the words for the upset I was would not properly be allowed in this courtroom.”

Yes, Lou Werner had been very busy in the two months since they gave Brian the air. “I couldn’t hold off any longer,” he would explain. “I tapped out on the ponies and the fights in the Garden and the basketball and the ’49ers, and I got in deep to the shys all over again. What else could I do? They had me licked. That’s when Little Marty started tightening the screws.”

And soon, Little Marty Krugman would be dead as a result of it. Not because he didn’t do his job, but because he did it too well.

He wouldn’t be the first.

In the isolation of protective custody, Gruenewald still broods about that lost Plan which would have netted him millions, and about the rogue who swiped it. The papers told him the raid had gone off like clockwork. The stickup team knew exactly where they were going inside the massive warehouse. In counting up the employees, they also remembered enough to ask whether the old Albanian man who waxed the floors had already finished up and gone home, just as he had said they should. They followed him almost to a tee, except at one fatal juncture, and the whole thing was carried out perfectly—so perfectly, in fact, that to this day the gunmen and stolen cargo have not been found.

But the thieves didn’t adhere to his Plan with the precise Teutonic fidelity he demanded, and Gruenewald maintains that that’s where they went wrong, that’s where it all started to fall apart.

It’s that one small detail that still bothers him: his Plan called for two vans; the thieves only brought one. There were 146 cartons in the Val Room; they only stole seventy-two. There was $20 million in those cartons; they only had room for $10 million. The rest simply would not fit. As much as they took, they had to leave just as much behind.

A man named Two-Gun Tommy DeSimone was supposed to get that second van. He didn’t do his job well enough. And soon, Two-Gun Tommy would be dead as a result of it. He wouldn’t be the last.

CHAPTER FIVE

Gin Mill

"Therein lies pure evil…"

—from a Women's Christian Temperance Union tract

The wise guys in Ozone Park all agree there was magic in the way the words were spoken. They conjured up images of a larceny to end all larcenies. They hinted of a record-book job. And in a gin mill that ofttimes seemed like Harry Hope's, where dreams of bigger and bigger scams were commonplace, they promised the biggest scam yet.

In gangland lairs throughout Queens, the story is told again and again. It's said that there was a plainclothes cop at the bar that October night, but either he heard nothing or it became worthwhile for him to forget. It's said that for the first time in memory, the call of the seventh race at Yonkers droned on with none of that scoundrelly crowd of gamblers, bookies, and loan sharks paying the slightest attention. The bartender had worked these places before; he was an old hand at diving beneath the sinks when a revolver clicked, and he could always isolate that click from the cacophony of background noises that swirled all around him. Like any veteran of mob joints, he was trained to be impassive, to see and hear and remember

nothing, but tonight he dropped and shattered a glass in disbelief. Even the Runyonesque crew of eight hoodlums downing whiskey in Robert's Lounge that evening were taken aback.

"At any given time, there's $20 million in the cargo vaults at Lufthansa," Louis Werner was saying. "There's $20 million in there today, there was $20 million in there last month, and there'll be $20 million in there next month. I know it's there, I know what it looks like, I know how to get it, and I know how to take it away. Interested?"

It was a speech that would lead directly into the vaults of Building 261. Ultimately, depending on the luck of the draw, it would mean millions for some, the graveyard for others.

Yes, they were interested, all right. And in a trice that whole animated barroom launched into a spirited, gin-nurtured discussion of how best to knock over the inviolable Red Baron, which, in its almost paranoid fear of Baader-Meinhoef terrorism, had equipped itself with the toughest security superstructure at the airport. (Only the Israelis' El Al was said to come close.) Frank Sinatra and Irish reels blared from the jukebox. Clouds of cigarette smoke billowed through the room. The conspirators tossed off shots and drained seltzer for chasers. Flushed with their plans, and perhaps just a touch of the liquor, the would-be bandits found themselves discussing a caper so grandiose that one said it would make even England's 1963 Great Train Robbery look like a candy-store stickup.

Amazingly, it was successful—so fatally successful that Werner's pithy little speech in the tavern that first night actually sounded the death knell for several of his listeners.

Werner's words would eventually condemn nine men and one woman to gangland execution as the drunken dream conceived in Robert's Lounge fast became a grisly nightmare. There were eight mobsters who met Werner

that crisp October evening. Two months later, out of that hapless eight, one turned up with six bullets in his chest (Stacks Edwards), another was found with a noose around his neck (Richard Eaton), and a third disappeared altogether (Little Marty). A fourth is on the lam with millions of dollars bulging in his pockets (Mr. Y), a fifth is in jail (Angelo Sepe), and a sixth is now believed to have turned government informant (identity unknown). The seventh and eighth are both at large, whereabouts unknown, each trying to kill the other.

Yet the Plan did work. It worked, but the fallout was bloody. And Robert's Lounge was the joint for it.

In the sordid tale of The $10 Million Getaway, Robert's Lounge can almost be considered a character in its own right, every bit as important to the story as Jimmy the Gent. Its floating clientele of cargo thieves, race fixers, labor racketeers, truck hijackers, and professional extortionists consists of some of the finest flimflam artists in the city. At 114-45 Lefferts Boulevard in the Ozone Park section of Queens, the bar is just a stone's throw from Aqueduct and Kennedy, the two multimillion-dollar focal points of local scams. There, by the dark side of the racetrack and the underbelly of the airport, the patrons of Robert's Lounge make their living.

The place has long been the informal headquarters of crime captain Paul Vario, Sr., and more than once his airport assault teams have sallied forth from there in the dead of night to empty a cargo hangar or two. Their successes, according to mob sources, could be plotted on a Bell curve in direct proportion to the number of "R.L. Kamikazes" they had consumed before starting out. (The drink, a potent mix, was said to have been introduced by Jimmy the Gent himself from a formula he remembered from

his bartending days.) But regardless of what they had under their belts, Vario's Robert's Lounge mob had a pretty good track record: federal investigators on the airport beat have estimated that upwards of sixty percent of the cargo heists engineered at JFK have been plotted in that one bar alone. That figure, which is remarkably high, was compiled on the basis of interviews with fences and informants. The particular specialty of this saloon duchy within the Tony Ducks organization was in arranging those robberies with inside help. And selling the swag the next day.

The fall sweaters and winter jackets and the women's dresses and men's underwear you see peddled on the sidewalks of New York at bargain-basement prices, as well as those five-dollar black umbrellas that magically turn up on the streets with the first drops of rain, have probably been stolen from Kennedy Airport's cargo area, usually through a tacit contract with Robert's Lounge, which knows exactly who steals what and takes a cut of the proceeds. Three cuts, actually. The first for "sanction," which is the green light for the crime in the first place, the second for "protection," which means rival mobs won't strongarm their way to the goods, and the third for "icing," which means the cops will be paid off if need be. "It might as well be drafted by a lawyer, written on paper, and signed and notarized," says a police source at the 113th. "You don't steal nothing from the airport, and you don't peddle it, either, unless Robert's Lounge says okay."

Robert's Lounge did have an important rival in this enterprise. The old Colombo family, now in the sure hands of John (Sonny) Franzese and the not-so-sure hands of Joseph (Joey Beck) DiPalermo, also ran a thriving soft-goods racket. They would plunder the waterfront and the trucking firms that served it, just as Vario would plunder the airport, and then they'd sell their own swag in another part of town. It was said that Robert's Lounge, employing the basic techniques of market research, would send runners to

inspect the quality of this waterfront booty and compare the prices to give them an edge over the competition. Sometimes they'd employ the not-so-basic techniques of market research and dispatch toughs to upend a few crates of imported women's clothing or topple a few racks of men's belts or rough up a few street hawkers. But usually they were content to stake out their own territory; on the sidewalks of Herald Square, in the shadow of giants like Macy's and Gimbel's, the mini-department stores offered the same goods at better prices from tables and boxes. Investigators say the goods sold at the street markets on the south side of 34th Street originated on the waterfront, and that those sold on the north side once belonged to the airport. They've been able to trace a chain of command beginning at the bottom with the black and Puerto Rican entrepreneurs on the north side of 34th Street, and reaching all the way up to the bar stools of Robert's Lounge, to crime kingpin Vario, and ultimately to the walled mansion of Tony Ducks.

The line on Robert's Lounge is that it was opened about ten years ago by Jimmy the Gent because he needed a place to drink next door to a dress factory he controlled. He had to remain a silent partner in the business since the State Liquor Authority refused to grant him a license because of his criminal record. But he made the place in his image, just the same.

The bookmaking operation was run out of a back room equipped with ten phones attached to recording devices, the purpose of which was to confront the caller with the evidence in case he decided to deny placing a bet that was subsequently lost. It was run by a man known only as Checko Brown, who was rumored to have been arrested 189 times for making book, and it was considered one of the finest in the city. Then there was the gambling room in the basement, complete with three card games and a craps table, and another room next door that must have had the feel of

Room 101 in *1984*, where “the worst thing in the world was stored.” This was known as the “conference room,” or the “gym,” and was reserved for those gamblers who could not pay off. And finally, there was a room containing a couple of old army cots that was known as the “dormitory,” where fugitives on the lam could lie low for a few days at a price to match the Waldorf Towers.

On certain nights you could find as customers in the place most of the officers of Brooklyn and Queens organized crime, many of them boasting none too quietly about their latest exploits. For years, plainclothes cops kept a twenty-four-hour watch on the joint, but it wasn’t enough to prevent at least four murders that NYPD Homicide records say took place inside the bar itself, not to mention an unknown number of “disappearances” that led Missing Persons Bureau detectives to knock again and again on the front door of Robert’s Lounge.

An apocryphal story is told of the frigid winter night several years ago when nine mob chiefs held a sit-down there. They came in nine separate cars and were followed by nine separate cops assigned to tail them. The mobsters were inside only a few minutes when a flunky came out and invited the shadows inside for fortification against the coldest night of the season. There they warmed up for two hours with tea, brandy, and Irish coffee on the house. When the meeting was over, nine mobsters nodded to nine cops, and together they took off in eighteen separate cars. That was the kind of place it was.

The robbery changed much of that. Less than a year after it was over, in the wake of unwelcome publicity, a sign went up renaming the place the “South Side Inn.” But to the insiders and the wise guys, it will always be Robert’s Lounge. And no official change of name can affect that.

“For the people at Kennedy, it’s like a contest to try to get the cargo in and out of the airport before the Robert’s Lounge group takes it away from them,” says Queens Detective Robert Mackey.

And with the Lufthansa heist, Robert’s Lounge approached its finest moment one wintry morning.

Werner had come to the right place with the right scheme, and it was not by accident that he was in Robert’s Lounge. He had been summoned. The time had come to collect.

This was the “reckoning” that every degenerate gambler dreads. Yet for once, this was precisely what Lou Werner wanted, what he had been waiting for all these weeks.

He was in over his head. Way over his head. He would bet $500 a day, juggle three bookies and two shylocks, face a mountain of debts, and support a family all at the same time, though his salary was only $15,000 a year. He was about $20,000 in the hole, and he was into Little Marty alone for $6,600. He was losing consistently and there was no sign that his luck was about to turn.

There was no other way to do it, Werner decided out of desperation. Since he had dumped Gruenewald and resolved to go it alone, he had gotten nowhere. “Stickup mobs don’t grow on trees,” he would say. He’d tried to put one together for weeks, tried to find a “connect” man, and hunted about for a character he knew only as “Jimmy the Gent”—three words which to him, after all this time, must have sounded more like a code name than anything else.

But it was all to no avail. That was when his losing streak really began. He made bad bets and lost, and made no attempt to pay them back. He

would bet Team A with one bookie and Team B with another, so no matter what the outcome, he'd win one bet and lose one bet, thus suffering a net loss each time the vigorish asserted itself.

He'd been fruitlessly looking for his stickup team. Now he would make them look for him, and he guessed that somehow they'd have better luck. It seemed the only way to peddle the Plan.

It didn't take very long at all.

A burly visitor with a pockmarked face and three fingers on one hand had knocked on Werner's door. "Here's a dime and a phone number," the visitor said. "If anything good comes in at Lufthansa, call. If not…" The rest had to do with the fate of Werner's arms and legs. It was what he'd wanted all along. Werner called.

"Come to Robert's Lounge tonight," he was told. "And unless you've got my money and a lot of other people's money in your pockets, you better come with something good." The line went dead. The conversation was over. It was the voice of Little Marty.

Werner had made the ultimate gamble. He had run up his debt so high that he was a dead man unless he did something about it. First they'd take his savings, then they'd take his house, then they'd break his limbs, then they'd take his life. That was the pattern. He'd seen it before, with others. Against this risk, all he could offer was a Plan, a good Plan but a paper Plan, and one they might or might not buy. But it was the only way out, and it led straight through the front door of Robert's Lounge.

Meanwhile, 875 miles away, Jimmy the Gent Burke was still pulling strings from the lockup in Atlanta. His lawyers said he'd be sprung soon, but probably not soon enough to coordinate the Lufthansa job. So he gave pointers in airport thievery to Mr. Y in the visitor's cage and told him to put the arm on Lou Werner and find out what the hell he'd wanted. Earlier,

Burke had said, “No cargo punk will ever send for me; if there’s any sending for to do, I’ll do the sending for.” And now, by remote control, through his chain of marionettes, from a jailhouse half a continent away, he was doing just that.

It fit in perfectly with Werner’s new plan. “If I can’t find them,” he had said, “I’ll make them find me.” And his staggering debts had done just that.

Burke thought something was fishy about those debts, and sent Mr. Y. Mr. Y was eager for a new score and sent Little Marty. Little Marty wanted his money and sent the burly visitor with the pockmarked face and three fingers on one hand, the scourge of debtors. Werner answered the knock on the door, made his phone call, and came that night to Robert’s Lounge.

It was hard to tell at first whether Burke had used Werner or whether Werner had used Burke. But a few months later, when Werner went to jail and Burke began revelling in his millions, it became clear.

It was an old mob trick, and it was a Robert’s Lounge specialty. You build up a man’s debt until he gets cocky and builds it up even higher himself, exactly as Werner had done. Then you tighten the screws and cash in—usually on inside information.

“Bills of lading and advance manifests are at a premium here,” says one government investigator. “Or any paper at all—invoices, freight-forwarding forms, cargo slips—and God knows the airlines deal in tons of it.” Werner would eventually hand over some of these documents, documents that provide a veritable shopping list for cargo thieves. “It works like poetry,” the investigator goes on. “A free trip every now and then to Las Vegas, maybe a slight fractional edge on the vig, and you’ve broken your average, reasonably honest cargo worker.”

The group from Robert's Lounge has broken more than its share. And though Lou Werner would never know it, he had been groomed to be broken.

Lou was a neighborhood guy who could not live without gambling, a perfect candidate for the hooks of Robert's Lounge. He bet on sports for money and lost, bowled for big money and lost there too, borrowed from the shys and got into debt that was too big for him, $10,000 at a time, hung around the saloons and learned how to steal. From day to day, life for Werner was, as the press phrased it, a matter of "walking through a forest fire."

It didn't take the Ozone Park bookies long to pick up the scent of a sucker, and that's when they closed in. They gave him an edge on the point spread; they canceled some of his gaming debts; they sprang for the occasional junket out to Nevada or down to the Bahamas. For they knew that someday he would be useful to them. Now that day had come.

Joey Beck's holdings were one lure, the $20 million was another. The mob needed money.

"There's $20 million in the cargo vaults at Lufthansa," Lou Werner was saying. "Interested?" It was perfect. They'd rigged everything. Now all they had to do was hear what he had to say, and then they could take it away from him. And step by step, as if made to order, Werner spelled out the Plan he and Gruenewald had so painstakingly contrived over their innumerable huddles in the bowling alley. There was something in it for everyone in the room; it was the beginning of the $20 million dream.

After Werner's speech that night, Robert's Lounge took on a carnival atmosphere. Mr. Y was business-as-usual, and only wanted to discuss

nuances of the job. But the others felt more frolicsome. “Can’t you clowns keep it down?” he kept saying. And he puffed impatiently on another H. Upmann. Apparently they could not. Animated by the booze and the dream that had suddenly possessed them all, they were like six-year-olds at the circus.

Stacks Edwards, whose skin was so light that he could pass for a white man, was the object of the usual spook jokes. It was something he was always made aware of: organized crime, conservative to the core, where old prejudices never die and don’t even fade away, would never become an equal-opportunity employer. When Stacks recognized the permanence of that fact, he could often be found in the crowd of “handlers” forever surrounding Muhammad Ali, and he’d affect a Southern drawl and go around slapping five with everybody in sight. But usually he went to the opposite pole and pathetically tried to pass himself off as an Italian gangster, dressing like an actor on the “Million Dollar Movie,” with the broad-brimmed hat and the lapels a mile wide.

Tonight, Stacks took the ribbing well. He moaned old blues numbers and suddenly that Queens bar, much more comfortable with the music of Sinatra and Streisand and Dorsey and Tony Bennett and Englebert Humperdinck, rocked to the rhythms of the Mississippi River. For accompaniment, the normally sedate Richard Eaton jumped to his feet and performed a few steps of a tap dance-*cum*-jig. Werner, too self-conscious to say anything, and perhaps uncertain whether he was being treated as the founding genius of the heist or an errand boy, could only smile idiotically throughout, while John Angelo Sepe emitted shrill baying sounds, the bartender whistled plaintively, and Mr. Y—the H. Uppman bobbing up and down in his mouth—kept yelling at everybody to shut up.

Suddenly, Little Marty emerged from his alcoholic haze, looked around, leapt to his feet and clambered to the top of the bar. “To twenty million dollars,” he squeaked in the high-pitched voice that was his trademark. And he raised a glass to toast and waited for everyone else to raise theirs. “Here’s to twenty million dollars and zero zero cents!” They all drank to that one, even Mr. Y, who put little stock in frivolity.

For Lou Werner, it must have seemed a very peculiar introduction to organized crime.

That $20 million figure would come to assume mystical proportions in the weeks ahead. Werner spoke of it, Little Marty toasted to it, they all tippled to it, and, irretrievably, it became the yardstick by which the entire job was measured. Later, after that night in Building 261 was over, when they counted up the spoils and discovered they had only made off with half of it, a mere $10 million, it would become the catalyst for many of the murders.

The press termed it “the $20 million dream.” It was based on an open secret that was kicked around squad rooms and jailhouses, board rooms and warehouses. It was known widely among bankers and airline executives, cargo workers and freight forwarders, detectives and airport hustlers. But officially, on the record, it’s been denied by all of them for years. Still, it is generally accepted by the insiders that each of the major airlines stores an average of $20 million in the Val Room and blockhouses of Kennedy. In the spring and autumn doldrums, or in the lulls between flights, an airline’s vaults might contain no more than a skimpy $2 million in goods. But in the summer and winter rush, in the weeks before Christmas, or in the hours after touchdown of a cargo plane bearing an overseas bank shipment, the figure will soar. It is said that an individual hangar at the right time of year,

under the right set of circumstances, could have as much as $50 million stuffed into it.

Using the $20 million average and counting just five of the largest freight carriers—Flying Tigers, Emery Air, Pan Am, American, and Lufthansa—it means that at any given time there's a minimum of $100 million in valuables stored at Kennedy. Adding all the other cargo lines, the true figure is probably closer to $500 million. And in the Christmas season…

Jimmy the Gent used to wax poetic about that time of year: "I've never been able to figure out why, but management makes the help lay out holly and tinsel and even mistletoe inside all the safe rooms. In a good storm, with the wind driving off Jamaica Bay and the snow blowing in the air, it'll be white on the outside, and green and glittery on the inside, and the valuables all have red ribbons on them, and you couldn't ask for a better time of year to do a job. But forget the scenery; think of the money.

"Think of those cargo hangars as Christmas trees and those bonded parcels as presents. If you could put all the guards to sleep, and take the keys to all the vaults, and round up the men and steal all the trucks you needed; if you could have all the time in the world to empty the place, and a sanctuary somewhere, and a couple of years to count up what you took, then you'd find you had bled Kennedy for a clean billion. One billion dollars!"

One billion dollars scattered about Kennedy in forty or fifty Val Rooms in the Christmastide. Flacks for all of the airlines deny this. They also knock down the $20 million figure and claim the average freight drop holds only $500,000 to $2 million. Understandable from their point of view; why advertise your vulnerability? But your average cargo thief knows better. There's just no way to get around the staggering sums of capital the major

carriers actually deal with every day. Maybe it's inevitable at the largest air-freight center in the world.

But even at this moment, there are millions awaiting transshipment from the hangars of JFK to banks and lending houses all over town, or to money men overseas. And there are hundreds of pounds, perhaps tons, of precious rocks awaiting transfer to the diamond district on West 47th Street, or to gem marts citywide. Some of it will sit for days at a time, some for as long as two weeks, while red tape, customs processing, tight timetables, and logistical confusions delay its passage. As they say in Robert's Lounge, it's like an engraved invitation to armed robbery.

And no matter how priceless the goods, no matter how urgent the shipment, no matter how powerful the receiver, nothing can alter those logistics.

Say Shipment X is held in Hangar Y until it can be delivered to Bank Z. Then a cargo worker's daughter suddenly comes down with the German measles, the worker doesn't show up that day, a shift is understaffed, a mountain of goods takes longer to sift through, and the shipment has to wait another day or two for processing. It happens again and again. In fact, it's that whole daily cycle of mix-ups and screw-ups that made the $20 million dream possible. Not to mention acts of God. By the time Shipment X was carted off, Shipment A was delayed because a one-of-a-kind magnetic key broke off in a cargo-vault lock, and even in Queens it was impossible to find a locksmith to extricate it at 4:00 A.M. By the time Shipment A was hauled away, Shipment B was delayed because an armored Brink's truck got a flat tire. And by the time Shipment B was trucked out of the compound, Shipment C was in purgatory because a routine inspection of a McDonnell-Douglas DC-10 on the tarmac in Munich turned up a sheared bolt on the undercarriage.

In arranging the logistics, no bankers or brokers or airline execs, for all their influence, could ever foresee events like those, and they certainly had no way to prevent them. But a lowly cargo slave like Lou Werner could foresee them all right. And he could do more. Much more. He could make them happen.

It was all part of the Plan he spelled out that night in Robert's Lounge. When the time came, he could delay the crucial shipment. His job made that possible. It sounded almost too good, almost too simple to be true. As the foreman assigned to handle certain cash shipments, Werner had to be on hand when Customs cleared the packages, and then again to sign the transfer papers when Brink's came to pick up the packages and cart them away. If he was "conveniently unavailable" at any stage of the game, the money would stay in the Val Room overnight. Brink's would wait a while for him to show up, maybe an hour or so, but then they'd have other pickups to make and their own schedules to worry about, and they'd take off. The goods would stay behind for the night. And if the same sequence happened on a Friday, the cargo would stay put in the Val Room over the entire weekend. And nobody would ever think twice about it because a circumstance like that—a temporarily missing supervisor—was exactly the type of thing that was always delaying shipments. Werner would have his alibi prepared; he could easily have been at the other end of Building 261, or the other end of the airport for that matter, doing any one of a number of legitimate things, and no one would be the wiser.

By delaying a shipment or two, Werner could insure that Brink's wouldn't deliver too much money to its rightful owners. He'd make certain the bulk of the cash stayed behind where it belonged—locked in the vaults—so it would still be there, within striking distance, when the bandits came

to take it away. And he'd make certain there was lots of it. Twenty million dollars and zero zero cents.

Mr. Y listened intently to Lou Werner that memorable night at Robert's Lounge. As the only button man or "made" mobster in that gangsterish crowd, he was there as the personal emissary from Paul Vario, Sr. in Florida. Mr. Y asked questions, drank less than anyone else, gave everybody hard looks. He blew smoke rings from his H. Upmann in people's faces. And he took notes. He had the much-practiced flair for making everyone else in the room uneasy. Then he looked at his watch, shook hands coldly all around, and excused himself. And Richard Eaton, now dead, made grim, humorless Jokes about the hit squad Mr. Y was calling up and the rubouts he was ordering.

No one could have known it was prophetic at the time. But it was just too close. No one laughed. And they breathed easier and partied all the more when he was gone.

The appointed hour had come, and Mr. Y had a phone call to make. He had already picked out the phone booth. It was one he had never used before, the only kind that was acceptable in this line of work. He fed two rolls of dimes into the pay phone's coin slot, and he rang up another pay phone, long distance. The aging *capo* who answered was living in splendor and on parole near Miami, but he still liked to keep in touch. Paul Vario, Sr. never liked to be left out of anything, and his rage was notorious.

Vario was getting on in years. He had pleaded a nervous condition and a bad heart for so long whenever he was supposed to appear in the dock that now even he had come to be worried about it. He didn't make it up to New York much anymore, and he was reported to miss the occasional drink in

Robert's Lounge. But he did the next best thing. He made New York and his Robert's Lounge gang come to him, and indeed, a steady stream of couriers regularly set out from that Queens saloon to his Hollywood, Florida, retreat. The pattern didn't vary much: the money went south; the orders and messages came back up north.

All this, of course, from the same man who listed his occupation on his IRS forms as a "part-time scrap dealer, semi-retired."

Vario, in fact, *was* a scrap dealer. His interests had always been catholic. And whenever he played the old pay-phone-to-pay-phone method to contact his underlings, he used a surefire code to make sure he was talking to the right person. You could never forget he was a metal merchant…

"What's the price of pig iron on the Brooklyn market?" Vario asked.

"Three dollars and twenty cents a ten-pound block," Mr. Y replied, and lit up another H. Upmann. He was used to these grillings by now.

"Aluminum by the ton in Jersey?"

"Two hundred and eighty-five dollars."

"Bronze-copper alloy in the Bronx?"

"Twenty cents a pound, if you're lucky."

No police spy could ever answer those questions. Only now could the old man be certain he had the right soldier at the other end of the line. And God help the Vario associate who didn't bone up on the latest fluctuations in the junk-salvage markets.

Mr. Y told him the Plan; he told him who could be trusted and who could not, who was expendable and who was not. He saved his greatest contempt for Stacks. "The guys smokes White Owls," he said.

The operator came on, and Mr. Y put another roll of dimes into the machine, but as he launched into the details, Vario cut him short.

"Do it," he said. "Do it, and get me Burke."

“But Burke is in jail,” Mr. Y pointed out.

“Do it,” Vario ordered. “And get me Burke.”

“But…”

“Do it, and give Burke anything he needs.”

CHAPTER SIX

Safe House

Mr. Y had been right. Burke was in jail. Sort of.

The Community Treatment Center is housed on two floors of the Bryant, a shabby, ancient, sprawling residential hotel just north of Times Square, where handfuls of paint fall from the walls and flake from the ceiling each time you close the door to your room. The CTC is a minimum-security federal halfway house, where 150 male inmates are held for ninety days prior to their release from custody. Time spent at the center is considered time served on their sentences, and the men are allowed to check out, seek work, see their families.

The facility's red neon sign, shorn of the letter H, proclaims the "Otel Bryant." Cockroaches scurry through the rooms and lay their eggs in the stuffing of the old and stained mattresses. Furniture consists of a chair with three legs, a flattop desk, a lamp with a naked bulb and no shade, and a Salvation Army-style bureau. As you walk down the hallway to sign in and sign out, a TV camera follows your every step. There's also a day room for the inmates, with a window on the street, a couch that looks like it has spent the last couple of decades waiting to be hauled to the junkyard, an old radio that doesn't work, and a television that swallows a quarter before it'll turn on.

The men get five dollars a week for carfare and a five-dollar-a-day meal ticket, refundable at the Cosmic Coffee Shop down the block. They're allowed to bring their own linen, although the center won't be responsible for it, to supplement their one-towel-a-week allotment. And if they're not in on a drug rap (about one-third of the center's population is), they don't even have to submit to the weekly urine analysis. It is not a pretty place.

The CTC's most famous inmate was Howard Hughes' bogus biographer, Clifford Irving, who was treated as something of a celebrity by the guards, whom he would regale with tales of how he almost got away with it. Millionaire nursing-home magnate Eugene Hollander was also remanded to the center, after he admitted swindling Medicaid money and spending it on Renoirs and Monets and Cassatts for his Fifth Avenue duplex.

The facility's pompously stated purpose is to "reintegrate the wrongdoer into established social patterns," to return him to the "community" of solid citizens, and to promote "self-sufficiency." Nice-sounding words, of course, and probably a nice philosophy too, but totally meaningless and laughable to most halfway-house residents. So is the method used to attain those laudable goals: a therapeutic cure-all known vaguely as "transactional analysis," a term whose gist must have eluded the convicted junkies and rapists and muggers of the CTC.

Jimmy the Gent would come to rail bitterly against "this damnable transactional analysis, whatever the hell that means."

Yes, Mr. Y had been right; Burke was still in jail. But Paul Vario, Sr. was right too. It was a penny-ante, dime-store, slapdash jail; the warders couldn't be taken seriously; there were no bars on the windows or locks on the doors; it was in the Empire State, not the Peachtree State; and there was

nothing about the place that could thwart the imperturbable Burke from using it as his operational base in staging a raid on Building 261.

Somehow, the news got to Vario almost before the Federal Parole Board officers in Georgia had made up their minds. Burke—whose prison behavior was deemed “exemplary”—was unanimously voted his parole the first time he became eligible, to take effect at the earliest possible date allowable under U.S. law. After doing a five-year stint in Atlanta on a ten-year rap for cargo theft and loan-sharking, Jimmy the Gent was coming home. The Board decided he could spend the last three months of his term at the Community Treatment Center.

The Board met on the evening of October 16. (Within hours, and before Burke himself knew, Vario had learned of their decision. No one knows how he found out, but the mob has long had intelligence sources of its own.) October 16 was also the night Werner briefed Robert’s Lounge on the Plan, and the night Vario and Mr. Y had their terse long-distance exchange.

Two days later, on October 18, 1978, Burke was in New York, and less than two months after that, Lufthansa would be hit for millions. With Burke back in town, the preparations could begin in earnest.

Jimmy the Gent had gone down to Atlanta in manacles, escorted by two armed guards. He had a reputation then as a tough customer, one who never went in without a fight. But he was coming back home alone, with an Amtrak ticket and a few dollars in his pocket, and a new suit of clothes, all courtesy of the American taxpayer.

He really didn’t need the courtesies. He chucked the Amtrak ticket, grabbed a cab to the airport, made a quick phone call to the right place so there’d be someone waiting for him, and caught the first flight back to LaGuardia. There was someone waiting, all right. It was Stacks. Still wearing his black chauffeur’s cap and driving the big shots around, Stacks

had gone back to the old nickel-and-dime rackets after his release from Atlanta about a year earlier. The men shook hands. Stacks opened the back door, but Burke, who fancied himself an egalitarian, jumped in the front.

"Where to, boss?" Stacks asked.

"Where do you think?" Burke said.

"Robert's Lounge?" Stacks asked.

"Robert's Lounge," Burke said.

He had been home less than an hour when he had his whole crew lined up at the bar, drinking whiskey with him. Mr. Y tried to take him aside, gesturing with his H. Upmann toward the back room so they could talk business alone, but Burke just shooed him away. There would be time for all that later. "I haven't had a good drunk in years," he explained.

Several hours later, thoroughly soused, Jimmy the Gent waved his hands, threw back his head, and bellowed for Stacks. "And now," he announced grandly, "take me to jail."

As soon as he got there, Burke took to figuring a way to get out. Despite the amenities of the Otel Bryant, he had never cared much for midtown Manhattan. He preferred Queens as a rule. But the CTC, off Broadway at 54th Street, was a vast improvement on Atlanta, where he had just done his time. And it was close enough to his old power base, his old watering holes, and the aerodrome he plundered for a living. Just thirty-five minutes away by limo. But first, he needed to get that limo.

With Burke at the CTC was Two-Gun Tommy DeSimone, an old Robert's Lounge hand, Ozone Park crony, and Atlanta jailmate, who had gone away for cargo theft and come back from Georgia just a day or two ahead of Burke. Their reunion would mean death for DeSimone. But at first

it seemed a happy coincidence that the pair were together again at the Bryant. Now the only problem they faced was how to get around, because the word was out about the heist, and the old haunts were calling.

Mr. Y solved the mobility problem with a dummy job in the garment district, a shiny black Cadillac limousine, a pair of chauffeurs, and several crisp hundred-dollar bills. It was an out designed with the utmost *chutzpah*: the men would sign themselves out, work out the details of the robbery in the taverns of Ozone Park, hoist a few, and then sign themselves back in.

Burke and DeSimone were on the CTC's much-heralded "work-release program." But their work involved signing themselves out for a no-show job that never existed, walking to a Times Square streetcorner where their mob-dispatched limo was waiting, yanking their driver out of the shooting gallery in the arcade off Broadway where he was practicing his aim on plastic ducks, barreling through the Midtown Tunnel to the borough of Queens, and plotting the minutiae of the $20 million crime of the century in Robert's Lounge and its sister saloons in the neighborhood. At the end of the day they would sign themselves back in again, and it all seemed perfectly legitimate.

Sometimes they would venture out at night. That's when the Benjamin Franklins would come in. They would peel off a C-note and reportedly bribe certain guards to let them sneak away, the Caddy would whisk them to a planning session, and they'd be back again in their sixth-floor cubicles at the Otel Bryant before their keepers woke up.

Mr. Y had orchestrated this particular scam, and he was duly pleased with himself. It involved using the old squeeze play on a needle-trades manufacturer on Seventh Avenue who had guessed wrong on that year's fall fashion line. The manufacturer had come to the mob for cash to cover his losses, and within months the mob had taken title to fifty percent of his

business. Now the manufacturer was told to put two more people on his payroll. Job title: garment cutters. Burke and DeSimone. He was told to issue them weekly paychecks, to send photostats to the center, and to make all the proper deductions and the matching payments for Social Security to give the whole thing the veneer of legality. He was told that when the CTC inspector came by, he should tell him the two men were “model employees”—so much so that he had given them additional responsibilities at another plant he owned a few blocks away, which was why they weren’t around just then.

And of course the manufacturer was also told not to expect Burke or DeSimone to put a foot in the door.

A no-show job was a high-prestige item in the mob. So much for the CTC’s work-release program.

The resources of the Paul Vario-Tony Ducks dukedom made the rest of the operation possible as well. Those hundred-dollar bills Burke allegedly distributed among the guards were said to come from “skimming” on the jukebox routes and cigarette machines they controlled in the south of Queens—that is, taking a chunk from the top before reporting the rest for taxes. That spanking new limo was on permanent loan from a private car service they owned in midtown, which raked in a fortune from the theatrical personalities who were serviced by the company. And those two chauffeurs were on their payroll anyway. One was Stacks; the other was known to the police only as “Fat Frankie the Driver.”

With the job and the money and the transport all taken care of, there was just one thorny problem the CTC still presented: transactional analysis. Burke and DeSimone were able to sidestep this difficulty by paying stand-ins to sign their names and take their places in the long-winded, group-encounter sessions.

And so, these two putative garment cutters, on leave from jail, journeyed to Robert's Lounge.

"I need six ski masks," Jimmy the Gent was saying at the bar one night. "I need six pairs of rubber gloves, twelve sets of police handcuffs, three men, and two stolen cars. I need a couple of lockpicks, and maybe five or six crowbars, just in case." He only had to say it once, and mob flunkies and assorted lowlife would rush off, armed with his shopping lists, to provide him with exactly what he required.

"The vans must be black," he demanded, "because that's how Kennedy Airport looks at night. The gloves have to fit perfectly, so no one has an excuse to take them off and leave a fingerprint. The ski masks have to be the kind you'd wear up the slopes at Hunter. None of these stocking-mask jobs like the junkies wear to bank bangs in Harlem. They're much too sweaty. And they outline your face so tightly that if someone wants to play hero he can give a pretty good description of you, and the feds can work up a pretty good composite of you the next day, and you can be back in the joint the day after that.

"No, they've got to be ski masks like a skier would wear, you know, fashionable, with a lot of loud colors in them. That way, when they ask the witnesses for a description, they won't be able to remember a dime's worth about your height or your build or anything like that, but they'll be able to give a damned good description of all the colors and patterns in your mask. The idea is to attract their eyes to something, anything, just as long as it isn't you."

During all of this, a runner named Bobby (Air France) McMahon, now dead, was jotting down notes. If Burke was the theoretician of the crime,

McMahon was the leg man. He was charged with actually selecting those ski masks, and it's said he went on a shopping spree at Macy's in Rego Park and bought fifty of them. One of the comical aspects of the heist is the image of Burke and Mr. Y and McMahon and Two-Gun Tommy spreading out fifty masks up and down the length and breadth of that entire long wooden bar, and solemnly selecting the six with the flashiest colors and the gaudiest patterns for the bandits to wear. The rest were unceremoniously burned to destroy the evidence. Meanwhile, the bartender, of course, was still pretending he didn't see or hear anything.

McMahon was one of Burke's chief flunkies, though Burke took pains to feed him Jameson's and refer to him majestically as his "director of commissary and provisions."

McMahon brought all the props together. He shopped in hardware stores for the gloves, in under-the-table Times Square discount houses for the handcuffs, in black markets for the firearms. He even got the rosary beads that would be placed around the rearview mirror of the getaway car, for Burke never did a job without them. Later he would boast, "I made it all possible."

Frenchie McMahon would perhaps have been wiser to have said nothing at all. Soon he was another homicide statistic in the Lufthansa case.

Robert's Lounge, during this period, was literally crawling with dead men.

One day, Mr. Y came in with Flatlands Tony so he could look things over and "meet some of the boys." Mr. Y made the introductions and Flatlands Tony extended a massive hand. He looked into each of the faces, for almost a full minute in silence, staring so intently at them that he left the impression he was memorizing them—which, of course, was exactly what he was doing. Then the toothy smile would play again across his features,

that unaccountable expression of childlike glee, and he would move on to his next prospective victim. The survey completed, he smiled again, toothier and broader than usual, and left Robert's Lounge for the last time.

"What the hell was that?" said Joey (Gas Station) Manri, now dead.

"We find out very soon," said Paola (the Vamp) LiCastri, now dead, in that deep Sicilian rasp. "Very soon."

They too would have been wiser to have said nothing.

At this point, none of the ringleaders knew who would have to die; circumstances would determine that later on. But it was true that several of the participants had been drafted because they were short on importance and long on expendability. And it was also clear from the mob's viewpoint that in an undertaking of this magnitude, with so much money on the line, and so many people who had to put their mitts on it, that not all of them would come out intact. The weaker ones might fall to the law and have to be taken care of before they had a chance to plea-bargain their way out of their mess by naming names. The greedy ones might fall to temptation and have to be taken care of before they had a chance to plunder the plunder. And the clumsy ones were sure to fall down on some aspect of the job or other, and have to be taken care of to maintain discipline and serve as a chilling example to other hoods on other jobs.

There would be bodies, all right. The only questions were how many and which ones and how soon.

The Paul Vario–Tony Ducks machine would take no chances. In the usual roundabout way, they had Mr. Y make the contact. And so Flatlands Tony made his macabre survey of the dead men in Robert's Lounge, and shook the hand of each of the men he would soon be stalking. Jimmy the Gent steered clear of this matter. "It's none of my business," he begged off to Mr. Y.

Mr. Y listened in silence, nodded abstractedly, and lit up another H. Upmann.

The plotting went on night after night, late October, all of November, early December. As a six-count federal indictment would later charge Lou Werner, this was a time of “conspiring to violate the spirit and letter of the Hobbs Act through the forceful obstruction of interstate commerce.” This was a time, as the legal language went on, of “knowingly, willfully, and unlawfully combining, conspiring, confederating, and agreeing with others known and unknown to obstruct, delay, and affect commerce by taking, carrying away, stealing, robbing, and obtaining it from an airport, air terminal, and air cargo hangar with criminal intent to convert it to their own use.”

Quite a mouthful. And quite probably the Robert’s Lounge Gang didn’t know that was what they were up to, those cool autumnal nights. They just drank their whiskey, that whole gallery of street-wise rogues who ranged from Damon Runyon types to the Dirty Dozen, drank more whiskey, took a break only when Stacks belted out a blues number in that throaty, guttural voice, and went blithely about their business conspiring to violate the spirit and the letter of the Hobbs Act, which, of course, none of them had ever heard of.

The roster of the Lufthansa felons that Jimmy the Gent was recruiting in the saloons he knew best read like the roll call of a World War II combat platoon from a 1944 propaganda movie. There were two Irishmen, several Italian-Americans, one Sicilian, one Jew, one Negro, one Puerto Rican, one WASP, one German, and even one woman. Queens, for all its Archie Bunker reputation, could also be the “borough of brotherhood,” as the press phrased it, at least as far as crime was concerned.

But it was transient brotherhood, to be sure. As in the movies, this platoon was about to storm an enemy stronghold, and, as in the movies, sacrifices would have to be made.

The division of labor was worked out by liquored-up men during prolonged drinking bouts.

Jimmy the Gent and Mr. Y would lead the stickup team into Building 261. (This was considered unusual, and indicated how high the stakes really were for the Paul Vario-Tony Ducks organization, since at that level a mobster has ordinarily graduated from holdups. It is much more common for a Mr. Y or a Jimmy the Gent to coordinate and engineer a major raid than actually to take part in it.) With them would be four Italian gunmen, experienced bandits all, who would be paid as contract workers for a night's labors in the Lufthansa blockhouse. This ill-starred quartet would include Gas Station Joey, now dead, Paola The Vamp, now dead, Two-Gun Tommy, now dead, and John Angelo Sepe, now jailed and the lone survivor of half a dozen abortive attempts on his life. (Jimmy the Gent and Mr. Y, it should be pointed out, are now believed to be millionaires.)

Before the raid, Frenchie McMahon, utility man, now dead, would pile up the equipment needed to stage it. Theresa (Terry) Ferrant, now dead, would smuggle out of Lufthansa the invoices and bills of lading bearing on the contents of the Val Room, and the advance manifests from certain critical cargo flights expected from Frankfurt, Germany. And Stacks would rent an apartment just blocks from the airport to be used as an early drop site and point of division for some of the money.

Immediately after the raid, black Stacks, now dead, was to destroy one of the vans used in the getaway in a New Jersey compactor. Little Marty Krugman, now dead, was to take the other to be crushed in a Connecticut

salvage yard run by a dealer who was known to ask no questions. Then the six-member assault force would set off on six separate routes.

A few days after that, the couriers would head out in different directions with the money, most of them going south to Paul Vario's Florida hideaway. Richard Eaton, now dead, would make one trip. Sepe would make another. And a Hispanic conspirator named Anthony Rodriguez, whereabouts unknown, would make a third.

A few days after that, if necessary—and it already looked increasingly as though it would be necessary—Flatlands Tony would go to work.

Joseph (Joey Beck) DiPalermo was a frequent, if unhappy, visitor to Robert's Lounge in this period. Joey Beck, who never liked to be summoned anywhere by anyone, was there at the behest of Mr. Y, who himself was acting on Tony Ducks' orders. The two men went into the back rooms to negotiate with mob "rabbis" over the details of what came to be known euphemistically as the "transfer settlement." This was the pact by which Joey Beck was bailed out of the losses his mob suffered in the bungled drug-smuggling effort in the Rockaways. His people got to stay alive, and his Godfather got the requisite $1.8 million in cash, but now the reckoning had come and it was time for his rivals to exact their price.

"Don Antonio wants your auto salvage plant on the Gowanus," Mr. Y would begin.

"But I took that one over myself," Joey Beck would object. "And it's been in the family over thirty years."

"The old man wants that plant," Mr. Y would repeat, a little more sternly this time. And he flicked the ash off the end of his H. Upmann. "So it must be," Tony Ducks' rabbi would chime in. "So it must be."

Then Joey Beck's rabbi would hand over the appropriate licenses, the appropriate ownership papers, and he'd sign the appropriate forms on the

dotted line. The transfer would be complete, and they'd go on to the next enterprise.

"Don Antonio wants those industrial carters you've got out in Jersey."

"But…"

"The old man wants those carters. He'll pay you, but you got to take his price."

"But…"

"So it must be," Tony Ducks' rabbi would chime in again. "So it must be."

And so it was.

After four or five of these sessions, the transfer was complete. The *i* 's were dotted and the *t*'s were crossed. Joey Beck's empire was effectively halved. And Tony Ducks took the larger of the two pieces. Now, whether the $20 million dream was realized or not, his kingdom had already grown in bounds merely because of the idea of Lufthansa. The deed itself would be something else.

And so, his business concluded, Joey Beck, dejected, brooding, listless, moped out of Robert's Lounge for the last time.

Jimmy the Gent wouldn't know of the tie-in with the Long Island Connection until months later, when he read an exclusive in the *New York Post*. He must have been curious about those head-to-heads in the back room, but he was wise enough never to ask. It didn't effect his preparations, so there was no reason why he should know about it. Just as in the question of Flatlands Tony, he preferred to steer clear. "It's better for my health," he would explain.

But there was another reason too. For all his power, for all the people he could command, for all the resources he could call on, Burke was an

Irishman. And in an Italian mob, that didn't count for much; he was necessarily kept ignorant of internal Cosa Nostra deliberations.

But when it came to the pure mechanics of mounting an assault on the supposedly unassailable Lufthansa, everyone else would have to step aside for him. Mr. Y learned this one night the hard way.

It was early December and the Plan was being hammered into its final form. One night, as they stood shoulder-to-shoulder at the bar, Mr. Y had a suggestion. There was a cop in a guard booth a quarter-mile away from Building 261, at an adjacent cargo hangar. The cop should be "gotten to," he said, "just to be sure." Mr. Y reminisced—he had once led a payroll stickup in Chicago, where cold-blooded logic had dictated that a man must die for the crime to work. "It was part of the plan: 'Kill the guard.' It's got to be the same way here. Unless you're afraid to…"

That was enough. Burke went for him, bar stools toppled, the H. Upmann went flying, and his boys had to pull the men apart.

"It's not going to be part of my plan," was all Burke would say afterward, and it wasn't. Burke, whose temper was fiery, was never known for white-collar crime. They put him away once for kidnapping, and he was said to have shot a man once, a heroin dealer. But that happened only in the heat of the moment, not because he had calculated that it was necessary. While he hated authority, Burke liked certain cops, and he wasn't about to condemn to death an unknown quantity.

Jimmy Breslin tells a Burke story from the 1950s, which, in a greatly embellished form, is still kicked around the saloons of Queens:

> Once, a long time ago, he hung out in a place called the Four Aces bar on Lefferts Boulevard, near the racetrack. It was a place where trouble was a casual item, and one night Burke and a guy named Jimmy Roccereto, who is dead, somebody from

the racetrack, and an off-duty cop got into a brawl and during it, the cop shot the guy from the racetrack through the hand. Burke stopped the fight and said that there was no sense for the cop getting in trouble over a silly fight. He made everyone, including the guy with the shot hand, promise not to talk about the evening's excitement.

Later, a police inspection group looked into the case and brought Burke in, but he sat in a chair and said nothing. He saved the cop's job, and the cop went on to an important career in the city.

The tension between Burke and Mr. Y that erupted in that fist fight was to surface again. Mob sources speculate that Mr. Y was perhaps jealous of the younger man, since at one stage, when it appeared that Burke wouldn't get out of Atlanta on time, it was thought he would spearhead the heist himself.

After the fight, it became increasingly difficult to argue with Burke. The discussions became more and more like monologues, and when Burke made a decision, no matter how arbitrary, no matter how dogmatic, it was usually final. In most other ways, though, he was a benign, almost paternalistic, despot; when Little Marty Krugman asked to be excused from the Friday-night planning sessions for the Jewish Sabbath so he could attend *shul*, Burke grandly gave him his blessings.

But when it came to the $20 million Plan, which was, now and forever, his Plan, he was unyielding. His statements became law.

"The Committee of One has made its report," said Richard Eaton dryly after one such edict. "Power has spoken."

No one but Richard Eaton would phrase it quite that way. Eaton, who had come out of Notre Dame with a fluency in several languages, was the

token intellectual of the Robert's Lounge Gang, and his tastes were somewhat recherché by mob standards. Raised in suburban Westchester County and somewhat of an egghead, Eaton had little patience with the boorishness of his colleagues, and little tolerance for a rough-and-tumble scrapper like Burke. He was a loner, completely out of place in that crowd, whose constant undertone of comments went way over the heads of everybody else in the joint, and who was sometimes overheard to quote moodily from *Only the Dead Know Brooklyn*.

It just seemed appropriate somehow, he would say at the time, more to himself, no doubt, than to anyone else in the room. It just seemed appropriate. A few months later they found Richard Eaton wrapped in a blanket, in the back of a trailer truck abandoned on a Brooklyn street. Someone had put a noose around his neck and tightened the ligature. He would never know just how appropriate it had turned out to be.

In all, police estimate, there were some fifteen to twenty-five Lufthansa planning sessions in the bars and mob joints of Ozone Park, Springfield Gardens, Howard Beach, and the Rockaways in Queens, and Canarsie, Flatlands, Bensonhurst, and Mill Basin in Brooklyn. There was even a midtown Manhattan meeting at the Cosmic Coffee Shop, the place around the corner from the CTC where the halfway house's inmates went with their five-dollar-a-day meal tickets. Jimmy the Gent and Two-Gun Tommy, plotters of a $20 million caper, liked to amuse themselves by presenting their food vouchers and dining at what they called "The Cosmic of Broadway," just like any other inmate.

Then there was the night Burke invited the gang into the Cosmic because he had to meet his parole officer nearby and couldn't make it out to

Robert’s Lounge. His whole crew trooped in, frowning almost to a man. Only Richard Eaton seemed to be amused by the unlikely choice of surroundings. Mr. Y knew of a nice saloon up on West 57th Street; couldn’t they relocate there? Burke just shook his head and started talking.

The place was, admittedly, a dump. With Times Square providing a sleazy backdrop to the south, and the customers and help a seedy foreground, the Cosmic Coffee Shop wasn’t exactly the stuff dreams were made of. Yet as the droopiest junkies in the city nodded off on the Formica counters, as the fifteen-year-old white girls just off the bus from -Minnesota sat listlessly over coffee, and as the thirty-year-old black pimps with the felt hats that made them look seven feet tall stood shamelessly over them, Jimmy the Gent just rambled on, oblivious to all of them, wrapped up in his $20 million dream.

“Lufthansa pays three guards on the three different shifts to do nothing but walk around,” he was saying. A reconstruction of his speech was provided by a source very close to one of those present. “They circle the building and walk all throughout the warehouse downstairs most of the time. Sometimes they go upstairs to the cafeteria and the offices and walk around there. Sometimes they go inside the planes and make sure everything is going okay there too, and other times they just walk up and down the runways. The idea is that in the course of a single shift they’re supposed to cover the entire grounds of Lufthansa cargo. And they’re told to take different routes around the area on different days, to vary the routine, so no one can see a pattern.

“These guards are armed. Lou Werner says they carry walkie-talkies, and taking them could be a bit of a problem. Frenchie, I want you to get their names; Stacks, you find out what you can about them; Joey, you spend

a few hours between three and six A.M. out in the parking lot at 261, and write down the exact times whenever they pass by.

“If we have to go in there blind and round them up on our own, we will, but it would be nice to find a bit of an edge somewhere.”

On and on Burke would go with his soup-to-nuts dissection of the Plan. The hopheads, slavers, johns and janes of the Cosmic Coffee Shop paid absolutely no attention to these proceedings. For this was New York City, and if seven or eight well-dressed men wanted to huddle in a dive and plot the $20 million crime of the century in their unsuspecting midst, well, they certainly weren’t going to say anything about it.

It was an only-in-New-York saga. The session came to an abrupt end solely because the waitress, a haggard old lady with orange hair, came up to Burke at the head of the table and demanded, “You fellows going to stay here all day and all night talking, or does one of you want something more to eat?” She had an intimidating presence, like many New York waitresses, and she’d be tart-tongued in an argument, so Burke grabbed the check, left too big a tip, and he and his boys all got to their feet and scurried on out of there.

Then there was the night Lou Werner walked into Robert’s Lounge with the blueprints. “This is what the inside of Building 261 looks like,” he said. The finger man also brought a homemade diagram of the alarm system. “And this is what the bells and the buzzers and the sirens look like,” he added. Werner flung the papers on the bar, did an about-face, and went out the way he had come in. They didn’t want him around any more than they needed him; the less he knew about certain things, the better; he wouldn’t be useful to them forever.

With Werner in the room, they affected an air of studied nonchalance.

But the moment the big doors closed behind him, they leapt to their feet. The plotters gathered around a grimy, tobacco-stained table in that saloon and handled those building plans reverentially, poring over them as if they were some kind of holy text, even though the dim light, the wafting smoke, the draftsman's fine print, and the whiskey made it impossible to understand what they contained.

Burke studied the layout and sketches of the alarm system in his room at the Otel Bryant. He spread out those blueprints on his lap as he sat in a stiff, wooden straight-backed chair through the drudgery of one of those long transactional analysis encounter sessions he wasn't able to get out of. He scowled fiercely whenever anyone asked him to participate. He resumed his scrutiny as the therapist droned on, leaving him undisturbed. And a couple of evenings later he was back in Robert's Lounge with a new injunction: "Get me a good electronics man," he said. "One who knows something about German silent alarms."

Apparently they got one. No alarms ever sounded on the night of the heist.

Fat Frankie the Driver was Burke's personal chauffeur during all of this, and he knew his job well. He never asked questions, he always stayed outside, and, as he might put it, he never heard nothing. He was paid to pay no attention to the whole skein of hugger-mugger doings he was witness to. He wouldn't even look in the rearview mirror if there was another passenger in the back seat, not even on the night when Jimmy the Gent administered a beating to one of them, a thug who wouldn't cooperate, just outside the Irish Circle Hotel, at Beach 108th Street in Far Rockaway. "Where to now, Jimmy?" was all he would say when it was over. "Where to now?"

(The victim of the beating was found by police dazed and wandering the streets shortly afterwards. He would later claim he had “amnesia” as a result of the pummelings. He didn’t know who had beat him up, or why anyone would possibly want to. No, thank you, he told officers, he wouldn’t file a police report; he really didn’t have anything to report. Case active.)

Then there were the field trips. The Robert’s Lounge Gang went on at least four of them.

The first outing was a pursuit much dreaded by New Yorkers: apartment hunting. The Plan called for Stacks to rent an apartment as close to JFK as possible so the money could be split within minutes of the getaway and well before the heat came down. Ozone Park was the best bet. A quiet neighborhood a few blocks from the runways, it also offered unusual discretion in that its residents knew better than to say the wrong things to inquiring detectives. The only problem was of the sort no one could ever have imagined would effect a super-robbery: the housing crunch. There were no empty apartments on the prime blocks Burke had selected. The realty markets were simply too tight. The prospective bandits must have made a strange procession as they fanned out and rang doorbells, talked to landlords, looked for vacancies, and registered with the referral services. After all, they didn’t care much about the place they got, just as long as it was big enough to fit six men and twenty million dollars.

That first field trip was a failure. It was clear that they weren’t going to get a place the first time out, as Burke had hoped. So he assigned Stacks and Frenchie McMahon, who specialized in such undertakings, to keep combing the old neighborhood until they found suitable digs. For a while, it seemed that the heist itself was jeopardized and might not come off because of an unpredictable, economic turn of the screw known as the seller’s

market. But at last, only five days before the Job, they found a place just fifteen blocks from Building 261.

Stacks was assigned to live in apartment 2B at 109-16 120th Street, in the Ozone Park section of Queens, and although he would never know it, he had also been assigned to die there. Seven days after it was over, Flatlands Tony would flash that sickening, toothy smile, and the “key killer” would pay Stacks a surprise visit.

The other Robert’s Lounge excursions all wound up at the airport, where the scene would shift next, as Jimmy the Gent, more pedantic than ever, led his troops there, like a middle-aged teacher escorting his grade school pupils on their first class trip.

Gangland informants say it happened like this: Fat Frankie the Driver and Stacks, still wearing his black chauffeur’s cap, shuttled the crew around in the two limos provided by the “legitimate” private car service that fronted for Tony Ducks’ extensive interests in midtown. That car service has been used for everything from disposing of bodies to shuttling millions of dollars around, according to federal tax agents who investigated it and identified it as a “hidden asset” of Tony Ducks.

First stop: Kennedy Airport’s Central Heating and Refrigeration Plant. Here was a futuristic structure that had absolutely nothing to do with the crime the men were contemplating. A glass-plated display case for pipes and pumps and condensers and compressors, this building, in a review by the American Institute of Architects, was termed “a multicolored fantasy: splendid and wonderful”—a strange rave for a functional workhorse that did little more than house a few professional engineers who controlled JFK’s heating and air conditioning.

But Burke liked the building too, and it had a patch of green in front of it, and it was close to Lufthansa, so he sat his boys around him and lectured

them about the Job until a Port Authority cop on a motor scooter, who must have wondered what on earth six grown men were doing on a chill December morning on the grass in front of the Central Heating and Refrigeration Plant, whirred up and chased them all away.

Second stop: Lufthansa passenger terminal.

The crooks sauntered in for a look at the other side of the Red Baron's operations. At Kennedy, the realm of the passengers and the kingdom of freight are two different worlds, and this world really didn't concern them very much, but they poked around anyway, just "for balance," as Mr. Y put it.

There wasn't a great deal to be learned, however, from watching the German businessmen and the American servicemen milling around, and before long they had gravitated to the bar for another liquid lunch. It wasn't long before Burke was offering to take on an entire German flight crew—along with a couple of tourists from Wilhelmshaven and a trade mission from Mannheim—because they dared give him an argument when his childish boasts grew too loud: "I could take Lufthansa tomorrow with my eyes blindfolded and my hands tied behind my back."

As his boys nudged him away, the braggart Burke kept yelling, "Just read the papers in the next few weeks, you goddamn jerries! Just keep reading the papers."

Third stop: the Pastrami King of Queens Boulevard in Kew Gardens, opposite the courthouse.

Here they ordered a stack of take-out sandwiches, picked up a couple of cases of beer, and headed off for an important site Burke had picked out well in advance for a picnic.

Fourth stop: Building 261, Lufthansa cargo. The parking lot.

This wasn’t exactly an exercise in discretion. The gang opened up the lawn chairs they had brought or squatted on the hoods of the limos, and as they munched smoked meat and guzzled beer, they gazed out in silence for almost an hour at the vast concrete walls, the thick steel doors, and the padlocked maze of barbed wire fences that would be their target in just a matter of days.

Employees of the German airline, strolling past, must have thought it odd to see that sordid bunch comfortably settled down to a picnic at such an unlikely location in such inhospitable weather. But, as usual, none of them said anything.

The quiet was finally broken when Fat Frankie the Driver, virtually mute up to now, cleared his throat and said it the best and the blandest of all. “So that’s where the money is,” he began, and his voice took them all by surprise, since most of them had never heard it before. “You guys are really figuring on making an impression on that place, aren’t you?”

“We are going to strip it,” corrected Richard Eaton gently, “of its not inconsiderable assets. And as the Committee of One will tell you, they’re going to remember us there for a long, long time to come.”

Fifth stop: the Chapels, Kennedy Airport. The Roman Catholic house of worship known as “Our Lady of the Skies.”

In the main terminal area at JFK, there are three modernistic chapels provided by the airlines ostensibly for the spiritual needs of Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish passengers and crews. Built in 1966, these structures have traditionally been the haunts of those passengers whose morbid fear of flying leads them to make peace with their God before leaving terra firma for what many of them consider to be the last time.

After the picnic, Jimmy the Gent wanted to talk again, and he wanted a warm, quiet place, so the limos sped off toward Our Lady of the Skies. There was no one inside, but the place was unlocked anyway, as it is twenty-four hours a day. (Very few other churches in New York still are.)

The Robert's Lounge Gang sat in the pews and Jimmy the Gent stood in the aisle and addressed them. He had a strange notion of religion, this altar-boy-turned-crook who was reared by strict Irish Catholic parents and educated at the best parochial schools. He saw himself almost as a father confessor to a bunch of Catholic thieves, and he was only too happy to minister to their spiritual needs. To him, it would be blasphemous to stand at the altar, or behind the pulpit, and speak of a $20 million crime against people and property. But it wouldn't be sacrilege to speak of the same thing, as long as he did it from anywhere else in the church. And he made Mr. Y snuff out his H. Upmann.

In Jimmy the Gent's unique interpretation of the liturgy, it was perfectly all right to plot, inside a church, a larceny so grand it would break several of the Ten Commandments. This, he felt, was because of the centuries-old tradition of the Church as sanctuary, a place of refuge and protection, immune from the long arm of the law.

And so, sheltered inside Our Lady of the Skies, and careful not to tread too close to the hallowed portions of the church, Jimmy the Gent delivered a get-out-there-and-kill pep talk in the spirit of Woody Hayes, or any other coach urging his boys on to conquest on the playing fields.

"Remember, that Lufthansa crowd of Nazis may think they're pretty tough, but they're going to be a pushover for you, I know they are. The Germans are the ones most likely to play hero—ringing a silent alarm or trying to take your gun away from you—so watch out for them above all. You can't miss the jerries—they've got those bulldog faces, prominent

jaws, and their posture is probably going to be the best of everyone's inside Building 261. If that's not enough, you can spot them by their hair. How often do you see real blonds in New York?

"Once you've got them out of the way, who else is there to bother you? There's that old Albanian man who waxes the floors, but he's not going to do anything except to another Albanian. There are a few Puerto Ricans, you know the type—they dangle their babies' shoes from the rearview mirrors of their eight-year-old Plymouths. It puts them in good with their saints, or something like that. But they're all family men and they're not about to risk doing something stupid that might get them hurt.

"Then there's the American cargo slave. You oughta know him best of all: He's a *shlumpf* like Lou Werner. He doesn't think about much other than himself. And why should he? His boss never did nothing for him. He's easy to buy if you want to buy him, and he's easy to rob if you want to rob him. Why should he care if his employer gets ripped off or not? At least it'll give him something to talk about in his silly bowling alley on Wednesday other than the point spread on the last Knicks game." Jimmy the Gent waved his arms imploringly, as if he were just wrapping up a sermon. "All of you know what to do. In a few days, you'll get out there and do it; you'll get those millions, and you'll get 'em clean, and you'll all have stories to tell your grandchildren, and God help the Germans who try to stand in your way!"

"Amen to that," murmured Richard Eaton from a distant pew in the back of Our Lady of the Skies. "Amen."

But nobody heard him.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Transport

At 5:45 A.M. on January 2, 1972, the chauffeur of a black Cutlass Supreme left the Hotel Pierre and got behind the wheel of his car. At 5:47 A.M., the chauffeur of a black Fleetwood limousine also left the stately Fifth Avenue hotel and got behind the wheel of his car. At 5:49 A.M., two men dressed in conservative business suits and carrying luggage left the Pierre's East 61st Street entrance and got into the back seat of the Cutlass. At 5:51 A.M., two men, who were also immaculately dressed and carrying suitcases, followed them out to the street and got into the rear of the Fleetwood.

The six men had been extraordinarily polite and well spoken inside the Pierre, and the eighteen hotel employees who had been handcuffed and tied and had their mouths taped shut for two hours would later praise their manners to the police. "They were real gentlemen," said the doorman.

But the men had also cracked open fifty-four safe-deposit boxes and withdrawn more than $4 million in jewels, cash, and negotiable securities, as well as a pile of worthless wills and contracts. It was a classy job, and until the Lufthansa heist shattered all the records seven years later, it was the biggest robbery in New York City history.

Everything had been letter-perfect so far. The six thieves had rehearsed their roles for months, and there had been several dry runs. Now all that

was left was the getaway, and that had been synchronized too. The escape route had been mapped out and two stolen cars would be waiting at a designated street-corner. Here the transfer would take place, and the thieves would continue to a safe apartment in the Bronx, where they'd hide out after the robbery.

The Cutlass and the Fleetwood pulled away from the Pierre and headed down Fifth Avenue, around the loop at Grand Army Plaza, west on Central Park South, and then north through Central Park itself. It went off like clockwork. The fake chauffeurs stopped whenever they hit a red light, and drove at normal speeds. They left the park at 92nd Street, and turned left on Madison Avenue and then right on 96th Street, where they were to switch cars. It was here, at the crossroads of the crime, that the whole thing almost fell apart.

The hot cars were to be left on 96th Street, facing east. That was the direction they were heading: east. They would make the switch and continue east to the FDR Drive, and then speed on to the Bronx and safety. But when they got there, they discovered that the hot cars had instead been left facing west. A minor slip-up? Perhaps. A small mistake in such a big success story? Perhaps. But that one error was to cost at least two men, and possibly as many as four, their lives. For crucial seconds were involved, and crucial millions were involved. There was simply no margin for any such errors.

Because of this mistake, the drivers of the Fleetwood and the Cutlass had first to make one U-turn to pull up beside the new cars and make the switch, and then they had to make another U-turn in their new vehicles just to get back to their original direction—east.

It was erratic behavior of the sort that would make even the biggest dullard on the force of New York's Finest suspicious if he had seen it—six

guys clad in business suits and chauffeur’s uniforms, making a total of four illegal U-turns in four hot cars, and carrying rubber noses, hair dye, fake beards, hammers, chisels, crowbars, .38-caliber handguns, and two satchels full of jewelry at six o’clock in the morning.

But there were no cops around; luck was on the side of the Pierre Six. Their swag and their skins were intact. The reckoning would come a few weeks later.

But it came. No one got caught, no clues were left behind, no big shots got crossed, and the $4 million score was not affected by the misplacement of the cars. But still it came. For there was another motive, a cold-blooded Mafia rationale, a pervasive Old World revenge ethic to the effect that screw-ups always have to be paid back, even if they do no harm. And the mob knows only one way to pay them back—with human life.

And so it came.

Six weeks after the swanky Pierre was knocked over, a woman walking a baby carriage through Crotona Park in the Bronx came across the bodies of two men slumped behind a fence leading to an abandoned tennis court. They had been shot several times in the chest and head. NYPD Homicide identified the pair as members of the Bronx crime family that had engineered the Pierre job. Mob sources indicated at the time that the two had been responsible for stealing and placing one of the cars. A month after that, the NYPD Missing Persons Bureau began looking into the disappearances of two other men from the same family. Before long, mob informants said you could forget about asking for them; they had been responsible for stealing and placing that other car. To this day, eight years later, their bodies have not been found. Case active.

Investigators have put the Pierre body count at four dead. And all because two stolen cars had been parked on the wrong side of 96th Street.

An entire volume could be written about the luckless members of organized crime and the monumental bloopers they have made in their use of stolen cars on big jobs. And an entire cemetery could be filled with their butchered remains after vengeful mob kingpins got through with them.

Lufthansa would contribute to both the history and the graveyard.

There were four simple tasks that had to be performed involving conveyances for the Plan for Building 261 to work: steal Van A and Van B in time for the stickup, and crush Van A and Van B in industrial compactors immediately after the stickup. But of the four chores, only one was ever carried out. Van A was stolen, but it was never crushed; Van B was never stolen, and therefore couldn't be crushed.

And two men, Stacks Edwards and Two-Gun Tommy, would be murdered, at least in part because of those blunders.

"There's different philosophies," Jimmy the Gent was saying one night in the smoke-filled, liquor-fumed back room at Robert's Lounge, "about how to get the wheels you need. Some guy'll wait and get the car at the very last minute before the job. They'll pay a couple of neighborhood kids to go out and grab it for 'em. But that's no good if you ask me. Suppose the kid gets-pinched for trashing a candy store? He's got some smartass Legal Aid lawyer who'll do anything to get him off and who knows the kid doesn't want to be branded a JD. So the next thing you know, he's telling the bulls about this big shot he once stole a car for who paid him fifty bucks, even though he would have done it for twenty. And the next thing you know after that is the bulls are onto you and you can't figure out how. So forget the kids, no matter how much you trust 'em. It's better to do it yourself and take no chances."

Then there was the question of timing. “It’s risky to steal your car on the night of the job. What if there’s no gas in it? What if the muffler’s about to fall off, or the tire’s about to go flat? There’s a lot of junk heaps out there. And I’ve known guys who’ve gotten stopped for driving without headlights and then been pulled in when the cops discovered a few thousand in cash lying in the back seat of the car.

“No, you need time to check it out. But it’s risky to steal too much in advance, too, because then there’s an alarm out for the car and by the time you’ve fixed it up and you’re ready to roll, a cop in a squad car comes along and he’s going to recognize the description or spot the plates. Every single radio patrol cop in the city is given a computer printout of all the hot cars on every single day, and if you’re on the hot sheet, you’re through.”

There was an ideal solution to the vehicle problem, but it sounded so fantastic, so inconceivable, that it could only work in barroom chatter. “Try to arrange it,” said Jimmy the Gent with a straight face, “so the owner of the van gives you his keys and then reports his car stolen only when and where you tell him to.”

And then Jimmy the Gent set out to do just that.

He was still bedding down at the Otel Bryant in those days, still ducking transactional analysis whenever he could. He would sign himself out for the work-release program, and then sally forth to find a man somewhere who’d let him steal his car, for that was one project he’d assigned to himself. “Well,” he’d say cheerily to the guard on duty, “I’m off to cut garments,” as if the joke were too good to keep to himself.

Then the arms would swing freely at his side and Fat Frankie the Driver would take him to work. Of a sort.

Most of this work was done at night, and by himself—there was no reason for his gang to know how he got the van, just as long as he got it,

and he had his own confidential sources to protect if he was ever going to use them again.

The Benjamin Franklins may have come in especially handy at this juncture. It's believed that certain guards may have accepted his hundred-dollar handouts and let him come and go as he pleased. Their only requirement, according to CTC sources, was that he get back before 8:00 A.M., when the next shift came on, so he'd be recorded as accounted for when a guard came around on a routine check.

(In an interview, Matthew Walsh, director of the Community Treatment Center, denied any knowledge of bribery in his institution. But he conceded that because of "shift changes, a short staff, legitimate comings and goings, and minimum-security conditions," it was "fairly easy" for a resourceful inmate to sneak out of the halfway house.)

When Jimmy the Gent hit the street in this period, he went looking for his first gang, a scattered bunch of crooks he had long ago brought together, and had once known affectionately as "my Carolina crew." He made many of them their first real money. He had ushered others of them into influential positions in organized crime, or outside of it. They were his bright young men, and they were a world apart from his Robert's Lounge Gang. They would get that van for him. They owed him one.

Years ago, on the day New York State put a stiff new tax on cigarettes, Jimmy the Gent dreamed up the scheme that would earn him his first tax-free million.

The sales tariff was a burden nobody wanted—nobody, that is, except Nelson Rockefeller, the people who ran his cash-starved state treasury, and the anti-smoking lobby, and that was enough to insure its passage. But everybody else hated it. The small retailers, the cigarette-machine

operators, even the giant supermarket chains and the powerful tobacco industry, were up in arms. And they were in an unusually rebellious mood.

So when Burke's first trailer truck pulled into town with its precious cargo of bootleg cigarettes from North Carolina, they were gobbled up in an instant. Soon he had five trucks coming up from Raleigh and Durham and Greensboro and Winston-Salem, then ten trucks, then twenty. At one stage, he had as many as fifty trucks barreling up and down Interstate 95. They used to flash their headlights conspiratorially at each other as they passed in the night.

Burke had thought of the move before anyone else, and pretty soon he had the rest of organized crime following his lead and sending trucks to the duty-free Carolinas. And Burke became a big name in the underworld overnight.

His Carolina crew managed to stay one step ahead of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, and it was rumored that he had a powerful friend in the agency's investigative arm.

This was the first gang Burke had put together, and in addition to some fifty truckers, a handful of accountants, a few muscle men, and some legal talent to coordinate the whole thing, he was also supposed to have had over a hundred runners around New York hustling the cigarettes for him. There was money in it for all of them. Burke cleared a million before he gave up, though it was said he drank and gambled it all away on a six-month binge. His boys got rich too, and many went on to become shakers and movers both in the mob and in the respectable orbits outside of it.

And they stayed loyal to him. Yes, they owed him one. And now he needed to collect.

It was a strange spectacle: Burke swaggering into the opulent, well-appointed banking offices on Wall Street, where some of his best

accountants had gone, or into the plush, mahogany-walled law libraries of the most exclusive firms on Park Avenue, where some of the best rabbis had wound up, and asking his old Carolina crewmembers, now hopelessly respectable in their three-piece suits, what kinds of cars they owned, what sort of shape the cars were in, what kind of pickup they got, and whether the owners would mind terribly if he stole them. He was even considerate enough to tell them to check their insurance policies to make sure they had full coverage in the event of theft.

In all, Burke collected more than ten different sets of ignition keys. He would make up his mind at his leisure, and only after he took a test spin in each of the cars, and only after a mob mechanic gave them a good going-over. There weren't many requirements. The van didn't have to be very sleek, but it did have to be fast; it had to be of a nondescript color, preferably black; and above all, it had to be roomy. The $20 million dream required that. It would have to hold a lot of cartons and a lot of valuables.

Three days before the heist, Burke told a Long Island man to clear the glove compartment in his six-month-old van of any papers that might be important to him. His car was about to be stolen. Burke told him to check the gas, the oil, the water, and the hydraulic fluid. He told him to check the air in the tires. He told him the spare looked a little ragged, and to replace it. And he told him to start shopping around for a new car; he would never see this one again. On that score alone, Burke turned out to be mistaken.

The following account was supplied originally by sources inside the Nassau County Police Department, and then confirmed independently by well-placed sources within the Queens District Attorney's office. Joseph M., mid-thirties, of a suburban township near Belmont Racetrack on the Island, had spent a couple of years driving the big eighteen-wheelers up from the Carolinas for Burke. Now he was an unemployed trucker, and he

hadn’t steered a rig in months. Joseph M., whose cousin was a Port Authority police sergeant assigned to LaGuardia Airport, was perfect for the job. Investigators would never be able to link him with Burke.

His car was also perfect. And the circumstances were perfect, too. A relative of Joseph M.’s had just died. The wake would be held in Queens, near a road that led to the airport, on December 10, 1978, at night.

It was shortly before midnight that winter day when Joseph M. relayed the word to Burke that he had gone to a booze-up after the wake. His car was exactly where he had been told to leave it. He would report it missing exactly when he was told to report it.

And it was a few hours after midnight, on December 11, 1978, when Fat Frankie the Driver screeched his limousine to a stop opposite the address he had been given, 57-12 Lawrence Street in Flushing. Six men dressed in dark clothing jumped out of the limo and piled into a black 1978 Ford Econoline van of the 150 series, New York State license plate number 508-HWM—owner, Joseph M. The theft had begun.

It had been no accident that Burke picked Lawrence Street. It was just a block or two away from a six-lane strip of asphalt laid down by Robert Moses in the 1940s and dead-ending eight miles to the south, at John F. Kennedy International Airport. Within minutes, the Ford Econoline was cruising down the Van Wyck Expressway, bound for a place known as Building 261.

And shortly after that, at the agreed-on hour, with the agreed-on alibi of the wake, Joseph M. was phoning the 109th precinct.

“Some sonofabitch bastard just stole my brand-new car,” he told the desk officer.

Stacks was waiting at a garage in Brooklyn for the robbers to return. He carried a set of license plates to switch with the ones on the van used in the job. He carried a slip of paper with an address of a compactor somewhere in New Jersey, and he carried five hundred dollars in cash to pay the owner of that crusher to quietly dispose of the evidence. For once, he wasn't wearing the black chauffeur's cap.

No one can know what was going through Stacks' mind when he botched the assignment, doubtless the most important he had ever been given. All that is known for sure is that the plates were never swapped, the van was never compacted, and the money was never used that night for anything except a great deal of Kahlua and cream.

Why Stacks never made it to the auto graveyard in Jersey will always remain a mystery. Instead, he dumped the van on a Brooklyn street.

As the six bandits scurried off on their separate routes, secure in the knowledge that he was on his way to crunch the Econoline in an out-of-state scrap yard, Stacks inexplicably drove off in the opposite direction, toward the slums, and parked the van around the corner from an all-night, all-black social club, the type with the pool table in the back and the limited selection of Kahlúa, bourbon, scotch, and rum in the front. This was Brownsville, once Jewish, now black, a neighborhood scarred like a war zone, a ghetto so bad the cops never even bothered to raid those illegal social clubs since it was impossible to shut them down. It was a long way from New Jersey.

No one will ever know whether Stacks only intended to stop for a drink or two to unwind before proceeding with his mission to the Garden State. But he ended up spending almost twenty-four hours in that social club, and he ended up putting almost the entire five hundred dollars on the bar and the pool table.

It got light, and it got dark, and it got light all over again, but Stacks never left.

Meanwhile, at East 95th Street, between Church Avenue and Linden Boulevard, in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn, a meter maid was putting the first parking ticket under the windshield wiper of the black Ford Econoline van of the 150 series. Stacks never returned for the car. He would never see it again. He just kept drinking Kahlua and cream, and losing bets on pool, and buying the house until the money ran out, and then he went back to his apartment to wait for the end.

Two days passed, then three. Finally, almost seventy-two hours after the heist, a traffic cop on routine patrol noticed that the illegally parked van with the stack of five or six parking tickets under the windshield wiper was the same vehicle as the one for which an all-points bulletin had been issued days ago in the Lufthansa case. The same vehicle that hundreds of cops, exhaustively combing the tri-state area, had been unable to find.

Investigators confirmed they had recovered the getaway car. Seven law-enforcement squads descended on it. The press descended on it. Forensic experts swarmed all over it. Lab cops dusted it. Fingerprints were found on its mudguard. The swirls were compared with the thousands on file. And the first clues were found. The pursuit had begun.

But the vengeance had begun, too. For Stacks had made a mistake of a magnitude the mob could never forgive. On December 18, 1978, seven days after the job, as Steven (Stacks) Edwards slept in the apartment he had rented for the job, the killer opened fire, and Stacks became the first homicide statistic in the Lufthansa case.

Months passed.

The Ford Econoline van of the 150 series had been impounded and optimistically labeled “Government Exhibit A,” in hopes that the six

gunmen would be nailed swiftly and the car could be used as evidence against them. But it didn't quite work out that way. Those bandits who were not killed are still on the loose. So, after a while, Justice Department lawyers dropped the evidential designation and the van came out of the federal warehouse where it had been stored and was returned, with a full tank of gas, to a former tobacco runner named Joseph M.

No charges were ever filed against him. He was never accused of any crime. And to this day, if you go out to Long Island, to the area near Franklin Square where Nassau Boulevard and the Hempstead Turnpike intersect, you can still see Joseph M. calmly puttering around his home in the black Ford van that was used to mount the record-book super-heist at Building 261.

Van A was "stolen," but it was never crushed. Van B was never even stolen.

The original Gruenewald-Werner Plan called for two vans. Jimmy the Gent had wanted to find out if this provision was necessary. On his orders, one of the thieves had actually gone to the library, perhaps for the first time in his life, and somehow calculated that the sheer weight and bulk of the mystical $20 million in money bags and jewelry boxes made two getaway vehicles necessary. He was right. A lone van simply could not carry six men and all those parcels.

But one of the actors bungled his role badly, and at 3:15 A.M. on December 11, there was only one van in tow as the bandits approached JFK's 150th Street entrance.

Like Stacks, Two-Gun Tommy DeSimone is dead now, and so no one will ever really know the mystery of why he did what he did—or rather, why he did not do it. Two-Gun Tommy was supposed to have obtained that

second van. Up until their very last moments in the CTC, he was still assuring Burke that the car would arrive momentarily, but of course it never did. How he had planned the relatively simple chore of getting the wheels is unknown. What part of the scheme fell through is unknown, too. But the long and the short of it was that now there would be one van too few.

Somehow the lessons the Committee of One had taught had all been lost on DeSimone. From Robert's Lounge to the Central Heating and Refrigeration Plant, from the Cosmic Coffee Shop to Our Lady of the Skies, it had all been for naught.

Two-Gun Tommy just shrugged. It was too late now. There was nothing he could do about it anymore. "Something must have gone wrong," was all he offered by way of explanation. "Something must have gone wrong." It was a bit of an understatement.

The loot was stuffed into the black van, the only van that had been brought for it to be stuffed into. They crammed in a solid $10 million in cash and gems, rearranging the cargo three times, forcing in as much as they possibly could, so that by the end, in order to have room for the goods and the six men, one of the bandits had to sit on another's lap. But it still didn't work. They talked of stealing an employee's car or breaking up the cartons to make more room. But it was already too late for that. It would be getting light and the day shift would start arriving soon.

Nothing would work.

They had robbed their way into the *Guinness Book of World Records* with the $10 million they made off with in Joseph M.'s machine. But the phantom van would have doubled their haul, and mob higher-ups had already made plans for the balance of the take, a balance they would never see. A lot of people would be disappointed. The recriminations would be swift.

Thomas (Two-Gun Tommy) DeSimone was responsible for the screw-up. He was cursed roundly, and the jokes that were made left no one laughing. One of the crooks suggested leaving him behind for the bulls to pick up when they finally got to Building 261; this would give them more room for the loot. And DeSimone, who would vanish without a trace in a month, could only smile morosely, for their black humor foreshadowed what he must have known was coming.

Jimmy the Gent was kinder than his jeering cohorts. “The world is full of Monday-morning quarterbacks,” he told them.

And then he took Two-Gun Tommy aside. “Well,” said Jimmy the Gent philosophically, “perhaps you should have gone to that transactional analysis after all.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Borough

> “But above the gray land and the spasms of bleak dust which drift endlessly over it, you perceive, after a moment, the eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg. The eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg are blue and gigantic—their retinas are one yard high. They look out of no face, but, instead, from a pair of enormous yellow spectacles which pass over a non-existent nose. Evidently some wild wag of an oculist set them there to fatten his practice in the borough of Queens, and then sank down himself into eternal blindness, or forgot them and moved away. But his eyes, dimmed a little by many paintless days under sun and rain, brood on over the solemn dumping ground.”
>
> F. Scott Fitzgerald,
> *The Great Gatsby*

“The nadir of our sufferings,” wrote an eminent British food and travel critic in a recent guidebook, “was reached at Kennedy Airport.”

For there was simply no satisfactory place in which to dine. Those sufferings, while admittedly just culinary in nature, were apparently of such

stomach-wrenching magnitude that the author vowed never to return to the vicinity of the planes again. Awash in a sea of “prehistoric eating houses” distinguished only by the “unadulterated rubbish” they dish out, he could only describe those which were the least awful. JFK, according to Egon Ronay in the new edition of his *Lucas Guide*, is a gastronomically foreboding world where “glutinous casseroles are unscrupulously described in Ritz language,” and then served, and poorly served at that, solely out of “contempt for the passenger herd.” It is a world where, incidentally, the state of the toilets is “truly scandalous.” And above all, it is a world where the slop houses invite any drubbing they got: “The food offered at the buffet of Pan American was generally execrable… The ‘British Pub’ at British Airways terminal was run in such slapdash manner as to be an effective deterrent to visiting real pubs in Britain itself.”

Not surprising, perhaps. The pub fancier, the wine taster, and the food connoisseur had long ago learned to stay away from the airport eateries. Indeed, there was no reason for them ever to have come in the first place. The whir and drone of the engines, the wash of the props, the planes that swoop out of the sky, the miles and miles of runway and taxiway and apron and tarmac—none of it was designed for the gourmet. But then, none of it was designed for the organized criminal, either. Yet it’s been a haven for him, a kind of looters’ paradise, a robbers’ grab-bag, for nearly four decades. Kennedy Airport, wrote *New York Post* columnist Murray Kempton, is a “megamagnification of Tiffany’s windows without burglar alarms.”

In New York, there are certain things you don’t do. You don’t talk about Carmine Galante on the sunlit garden patio of Joe and Mary’s Italian-American Restaurant at 205 Knickerbocker Avenue in the Bushwick section of Brooklyn. You don’t talk about Joseph (Crazy Joey) Gallo at the liquor-

licenseless bar of Umbertos's Clam House at 129 Mulberry Street in Manhattan's Little Italy. You don't ask the friendly bookie in the neighborhood gin mill who that barrel-chested Sicilian is he gives the unmarked envelope to every Wednesday at midnight. You don't ask what's in the envelope, either. You don't discuss Jane Fonda with more than one construction worker at a time. You don't discuss *On the Waterfront* at a longshoremen's convention in Red Hook.

And you don't, if you're jawing with a cargo loader, and you value your health, bring up the sensitive subject of penetration by top organized crime figures in the Val Rooms and freight bays of Kennedy Airport.

A recent series of attempted interviews with more than thirty cargo workers at JFK, about rampant mob influence in their trade, was aborted with a recent series of more than thirty one-liners, ranging from, "I'd really rather not talk about it," and "None of your goddamn business," (the more cooperative ones); to "Get the hell out of here," and "See that grappling hook over there?" (the less cooperative ones).

In 1942, it was the kind of place only a duck hunter or a dyed-in-the-wool environmentalist could appreciate—wetlands and swamplands and marshlands and birds. Then the city started filling in the boggy waters of Jamaica Bay in the south of Queens, and by the time World War II was over, a great airport was emerging on over five thousand acres of reclaimed land in the southeastern corner of the metropolis. For over twenty years it would be known as Idlewild Airport, until a November afternoon in Dallas. The sprawling compound that today is JFK is so vast that it is easy to run up several dollars on your taxi meter before you even get from your terminal to the airport's perimeter. It's so huge that in a recent high-speed car chase, it took cops over an hour to collar their man without ever leaving the airport grounds. It covers as much area as the island of Manhattan

below 42nd Street. It contains scores of passenger terminals, tens of thousands of parking places, a control tower, three chapels, a central heating and cooling plant, the largest cargo complex in the world, service and storage hangars, a branch office of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, a hotel, a bank, a garage packed with emergency equipment in case of plane crashes, a guarded quarantine area where a highly lethal botulism antitoxin is stored, a medical building, a federal office building, a police operations building, a boat-launching ramp, two canals for fuel barges, an aviation-fuel storage area, a post office, a remote runway that is only used for assassination-target dignitaries like Pope John Paul II, Fidel Castro, or the Shah of Iran, a Gulf station designed as a strange joke by Edward Durell Stone as a miniature of his American Embassy in New Delhi, India, and a scientific laboratory where hamsters are being trained to sniff out bombs left by would-be terrorists.

Not to mention an average of 3,682 aircraft, according to Federal Aviation Administration figures, at any given time.

Kennedy is the largest air-freight center in the United States. It is also the largest air-freight center in the world, with Heathrow a distant second. It has more takeoffs and landings solely for the purpose of dropping off or taking on freight in ten months than any other airport on the globe has in the course of a year. It deals in such volume that even the best estimates cite a “probable error of twenty-five percent, plus or minus,” when it comes to computing the amount of cargo the facility handles.

In 1978, according to those estimates, the airport transshipped more than 3.5 million tons of cargo. This had a net worth, according to insurers, who traditionally undervalue the amount to cover their own prospective losses, of more than $30 billion, and possibly as much as $50 billion. The $30 billion figure is triple the value of cargo handled there just ten years

before. And most airline brokers and industry analysts believe the figure will triple again in the next ten years—to $100 billion by 1990.

As to what percentage of this action the mob gets, and who they have to pay to get it, one can only conjecture. But one thing is certain—this extraordinary billion-dollar treasure trove represents a bonanza, a movable feast, for crime overlords.

Back in the 1940s, the mobsters started moving their fledgling airport rackets into JFK, almost as fast as the newly founded airline companies could move their fledgling planes into their newly built homes there. Soon, confidence men of every stripe were as much at the hub of the airport's activities as were the planes.

And within ten years of the ribbon-cutting, men like Paul Vario, Jimmy the Gent Burke, and Antonio (Tony Ducks) Corallo found themselves presiding over a sophisticated business empire that often seemed more solvent—and was, in fact, more profitable—than many of the cash-rich airlines off which they fed.

"I could close down the airport tomorrow," Paul Vario was once heard to say on a court-approved wiretap. And no one ever doubted that he could.

While a coup like Lufthansa attracts the most attention, gets the biggest headlines, contains the greatest drama, produces the most bodies, provides the quickest gratification for greedy mob schemers, and profoundly rattles the very foundations of the Mafia itself, there are other airport scams than cargo theft, and some of them present a larger threat, with consequences far more significant for the law-abiding citizen.

Kennedy Airport racketeers have used their base to take over much of the rapidly growing air-freight industry on the Eastern seaboard. With members of the Tony Ducks and Joseph Bonanno crime families as hidden partners in several airport trucking concerns, they have expanded their

influence over airport operations in Newark, Boston, New Haven, Washington, Philadelphia, Atlanta, Jacksonville, and Miami. This encroachment is an economic fact of life that actually contributes to the inflationary spiral. When an airline suddenly jacks up one of its fares by twenty percent, the mob may indirectly be responsible.

Investigators say it happens like this. By a quirk of federal law, airlines are allowed to send by truck the cargo that is supposedly “air freight.” The major carriers routinely take advantage of this little-known fact, a practice that is euphemistically dubbed “substitute air service.” Once the mob came to understand this, trucking skyrocketed in importance. (Gangsters had already made deep inroads in the trucking business dating back to Prohibition days.)

Now, it is feared, gangsters on both coasts are moving to monopolize the trucking business and hence to control air freight around the country, force up the rates, and then pass on the extra costs to the legitimate businesses they deal with, who, in turn, can be expected to pass them on to the consumer.

But that’s just the tip of the labor-racketeering iceberg. Teamster Local 295, which represents air-freight truckdrivers who do business at Kennedy, often disappears from the scene entirely after a few generous payoffs. The absence of 295—a tough local that cannot be ousted without a good greasing—from the labor stronghold that is Kennedy is usually taken as a sure tipoff that the company in question has been taken over by the mob. With 295 gone, well-paid union drivers are phased out, though one or two may be kept on for appearances or to satisfy NLRB standards, and they’re replaced by non-union drivers, mostly Puerto Ricans, who receive hourly wages just barely above the minimum and absolutely no benefits.

Even that is only the beginning. Authorities suspect that Tony Ducks and his ilk have begun to build a nationwide network to distribute contraband stolen either from the airport's loading bays or from the trucks themselves, through the accumulation of scores of air-freight trucking concerns.

If this takeover pattern is left unchecked, the airlines themselves, wholly dependent as they are on the truckers for their air-freight business, may become its victims. In that case, crime bigwigs might actually come to dictate what subcontractors are employed by the airlines throughout the system.

A phone call from a Paul Vario in Florida; an emissary sent by a Tony Ducks in New York; a message relayed from a Jimmy the Gent in Robert's Lounge—that may be all it takes in the future for a Pan Am to award a lucrative maintenance or restaurant contract to a firm already overrun with mob equity, a firm, no doubt, that would have little or nothing to do with the competitive bidding process. And should the airline resist this none-too-subtle pressure, it might suddenly find itself beset by strikes, slowdowns, sabotage, or, worst of all, an inability to find the crucial "substitute air service"—the trucks—to zip cargo from coast to coast.

Trucking is at the cornerstone of this extortion operation. When a trucking firm is taken over, the owner often "voluntarily" withdraws from his own business and turns over his share to his shadowy partners without receiving compensation. Then a few shop stewards are routinely beaten up and the takeover is complete.

A whole mob empire is being carved out at JFK, from where it is transported first through the Northeast, then down the Eastern seaboard, then across the continent, and finally, through influence over the airlines themselves, around the world.

The trucking firms are the first to go, then the unions, then the subcontractors, then the contractors. Then the distribution network for stolen property is set up. Finally, the airlines themselves must be considered a target.

By controlling the bulk of non-airborne operations on which an airline depends, by controlling thousands of workers in the employ of either the carriers or their affiliated businesses, and by controlling muscle men whose very appearance on the scene brings the implicit threat of major disruptions along every step of the line, the mob has already amassed the power to bring almost any individual airline to its knees. It has amassed the power to shut down Kennedy, and it has begun to amass the power to mount an assault on the stockholders of the airline itself.

Federal investigators believe that organized crime—acting through legitimate front men, corruptible unions, decoy companies, and other screens—has already taken over a sizable percentage of the common stock of one ailing airline, an airline that is considered particularly vulnerable to a takeover bid, whether it be legal or illegal. And even that might be only the beginning.

As Jimmy the Gent once said of Lufthansa, “No one will ever help you more in planning this job than Lufthansa itself.”

For if the airlines are the victims, they are also the unwitting accomplices in their own victimization.

Critics like Queens District Attorney John J. Santucci contend that the airlines routinely conceal the losses they suffer from cargo theft, assume the costs willingly, and simply pass them on to consumers. The major carriers compete with each other in this regard, vying with each other to report the

smallest possible loss. Their reason is obvious: an industrial supply company that does wholesale business with the air freighters will naturally prefer to patronize the airline that boasts the best record for getting its cargo from point A to point B without having it stolen. If Pan Am honestly reports its losses to theft at $1.8 million in any given year, and then Eastern elects to be dishonest and says it lost $150,000 that same year, then it stands to reason that the businessman will take his business to Eastern.

The moral is that all the airlines have a good reason to be dishonest, and at Kennedy, when it comes to the annual reporting of losses, it is an open secret that all of them are.

Moreover, the insurance policies are written so that the airlines have a mere $50,000-deductible provision on all their claims. This suits them fine. They would much rather pay that amount and have the matter behind them than risk jeopardizing millions of dollars worth of business by broadcasting just how much they really lost. The figures they do release are comical.

In 1976, according to the records of the Civil Aeronautics Board in Washington, the airlines reported paying out a total of $1,046,080 in claims at Kennedy. Of that total, theft accounted for $140,385, pilferage for $80,135, robbery for $106, and something called “other shortages” for $825,679. The actual total may be 1000 percent higher.

The airlines often trot out comparative figures to back their case. In 1969, for instance, they claim that losses to theft totalled $3,708,235 at the three airports—Kennedy, LaGuardia, and Newark—an amount that represents 0.032 percent of the value of tonnage shipped. By 1977, they say, the net theft figure had dropped to $942,420, or just 0.003 percent of the total cargo value.

The essential absurdity of these figures is highlighted by what happened in 1978. On one night alone, in one airport alone, in one terminal alone, in a

single matchless escapade, six guys from Queens made off with $10 million, and almost made off with $20 million—a figure that dwarfs the yearly "totals" of past years, which, doubtless, were made after scores of such adventures, at three different airports, on 365 different days.

A probe by the New York State Commission of Investigation disputed the airlines' contention that cargo theft is on the decline. The commission concluded that the airlines habitually lied to disguise the problem, that the incidence of theft was actually increasing at an alarming rate, and that the carriers clearly needed outside supervision.

That issue of supervision from outside the industry, tinged as it is with politics, has been the focus of heated Congressional clashes for over a decade, with the powerful airline lobby finally tipping the scales in their own favor.

The legislatures of New York and New Jersey, resisting intensive lobbying pressure, decided to act first. Albany and Trenton subsequently passed bills expanding the jurisdiction of the Waterfront Commission of New York Harbor to take in Kennedy and the other local airports, for they recognized at last that organized crime had gained considerable power at the hangars, much as it had along the piers.

The airlines vigorously opposed the resulting bi-state compact, which required Congressional approval, saying they objected to outsiders "tampering with the free enterprise system." Mob outsiders were one thing; they had no choice but to accept them. Indeed, they had already become insiders. But independent regulators, who would monitor their business and impose expensive security measures and extensive licensing procedures—well, that was something else again.

Under the commission's proposals, all the workers in the airport cargo area—from the old Albanian man who waxes the floors to the loaders and

truckers and labor leaders—would have needed licenses, and anyone convicted of any crime would have been barred from work.

But the compact never came up for a vote in Washington, in either the House or the Senate, despite favorable reports from committees in both Congressional bodies.

“It is a victory for the syndicate,” cried a bitter congress-woman after the measure was officially declared dead, “every bit as much as it is a victory for the airlines. Now the airlines deserve everything they get.”

A few years later, in 1975, the Waterfront Commission accused the airlines of “knowingly” misleading Congress during the battle by using “unreliable” figures on their losses. The agency said the airlines often did not even know where, or if, cargo had been stolen along a given route, and it charged them with covering the theft up once they found out.

As Jimmy the Gent was to say, “To keep themselves off the hook, the airlines are going to have to get you off the hook too. You can’t be charged with stealing something they deny was ever stolen. You can’t go to jail for theft if the airlines say there was no theft. Just follow their coattails and you’ll be all right.”

But how long the mobsters will follow the airlines’ coattails before everything goes topsy-turvy and the airlines wind up following the mobsters’ coattails is, of course, the question.

Early in the Lufthansa investigation, and with a considerable amount of civic pride, someone pointed out that almost all of those hooligans named in the crime hailed from Queens. “The borough of champions,” someone else said. “It couldn’t have happened anywhere else.”

For if, to people in Xenia, Zanesville, Whiskeytown, and Truth or Consequences, the sacking of Lufthansa seemed like an only-in-New York story, then to New Yorkers it seemed like an only-in-Queens story. Complete with a Queens target, an all-Queens cast, and the saloons of Queens as the proving grounds, the super-crime that hurt nobody and seemed to make a lot of people happy would do more for the borough's prestige and self-image than any single event since the 1969 Miracle Mets won the World Series in five games at Queens' Shea Stadium.

The County of Queens—which is named for Catherine of Braganza, the wife of Charles II—is the largest in area of the city's five boroughs, and second only to Brooklyn in population. Its 126.6 square miles occupy almost a third of the city's land mass. Its two million people make it the sixth largest city in the United States, bigger than Detroit, Boston, San Francisco, Dallas, Washington, Houston, St. Louis, Pittsburgh, Baltimore, Minneapolis, Newark, Cleveland, Atlanta, Miami, Denver, Seattle, New Orleans, and Phoenix. Queens is, of course, also the home of two of the three metropolitan airports—LaGuardia and Kennedy—as well as a small general-aviation field called Flushing Airport. The presence of these all-weather aerodromes is something Queens residents are unlikely to forget, as the screech and the thunder of descending planes and the din and the boom of ascending planes forever remind them.

Queens is predominantly a bedroom community, the most middle-class of the city's boroughs, with more private homes, often equipped with postage-stamp-sized front lawns, and more homeowners than anywhere else in town. Until quite recently, the last of New York's great open spaces were here, too, until they were carved up like the rest of the city before them, in this case to create thousands of detached dwellings that face Long Island both physically and spiritually—suburbia within the city proper.

As such, Norval White and Elliot Willensky could write in their *American Institute of Architects Guide to New York City :*

> The vastness of Queens and its relatively late development have encouraged the retention of the old town village, and subdivision names for its various communities. From a strong sense of pride and identification with the outlying suburbs, residents never refer to themselves as ‘Queensites’ but rather as living in Jamaica or Flushing or Forest Hills or St. Albans. If pressed further, the response to ‘Where do you live?’ becomes ‘Long Island.’

Though it has more golf courses, yacht clubs, beach cabanas, parklands, and cemeteries than the other four boroughs, Queens has its share of industry too. Tracks of the Long Island Railroad, Conrail, and Amtrak, as well as hundreds of trucking operations and the inevitable planes, make it a vital transportation center. In addition, Queens’ factories turn out everything from Stein way pianos to electrical power, perfume to biscuits, surgical instruments to prophylactics.

But it is as the last bastion of the working middle class, as the home of cops and firemen and construction workers and TV repairmen, as one of the only places in New York other than Staten Island where the all-white neighborhood still thrives, that Queens has made its greatest imprint on city life. And that imprint has traveled far beyond the city limits. On the day a well-loved character named Archie Bunker made his debut on nationwide, prime-time television, Queens became a national symbol of middle-class conservatism.

Archie Bunker lives in Queens. He couldn’t very well live as he does anywhere else in the world. The aerial shot of his neighborhood that opened

“All in the Family” shows the kind of one-and-two-family homes, clearly aging but still tidily maintained, that line the residential streets of the borough. More important, Archie’s one-dimensional views on politics, religion, and race seem an accurate, if exaggerated, representation of the views of at least a segment of the Queens population.

Queens people may not have the same fierce sense of independence and proud identification with their borough as do residents of Brooklyn, where some people still curse the consolidation of 1899 that stripped Brooklyn of its city status and made it a part of greater New York. But when they’re aggrieved, they know how to show it.

In 1969, the city was hit by one of the worst snowstorms in its history. John Vliet Lindsay was mayor then, a Manhattan mayor with a Manhattan orientation, a matinee idol with a movie-star face, a WASP who was generally hated by cab-drivers and people who lived in the outlying boroughs. Within ten hours of the storm, Manhattan’s streets were cleared. Within a day or two or three, the Bronx, Brooklyn, and Staten Island had been plowed. But it was a full week, and in some neighborhoods as long as ten days, before Queens was finally dug out. The Lindsay administration had simply neglected to assign snowplows to Queens. Almost all of the ones that should have been there were deployed in Manhattan. Residents took this as final arrogant proof that City Hall simply didn’t care about you if you lived east of the East River, and they got even at the polls. Later that year, Lindsay lost his bid for the Republican nomination for mayor because of an unprecedented turnout of outraged Queens voters who cast their ballots against him.

In 1972, Queens voters struck again. Washington State Senator Henry (Scoop) Jackson was in town that year, campaigning for the Democratic nod for President in the New York primary. Informed by his advance men

that one of the city's boroughs mysteriously takes an article before it, Jackson, apparently confusing Queens with the Bronx, spoke eloquently about "the needs of the people here in the Queens." He was virtually laughed out of town and never had a chance at the polls.

In many ways, Queens is a political anomaly. Its Ninth Congressional District is geographically close to Manhattan's chic and liberal Upper East Side, but the Ninth is as far away in spirit from John Lindsay's "silk-stocking district" as it is from the Iran of the Ayatollahs. This is Archie Bunker country, and to the conservative homeowners who live here, Manhattan is always referred to as "the City"—as if it were some faraway and exotic land. It is. While the wealthy East Side voted fifty-eight percent for George McGovern in the 1972 presidential election, the Ninth went seventy-three percent for Richard Nixon. Thus, in the heart of supposedly Democratic New York City—"the citadel of liberalism," as George Wallace once called it—the Ninth gave Nixon the largest margin he got anywhere in New York State.

In fact, according to the *Almanac of American Politics*, "Nixon's seventy-three percent was exceeded in only two other Congressional districts among the Eastern states, both of them in the heavily Republican area of tradition-bound Pennsylvania Dutch country."

Queens has always played an odd role in American politics. In 1979, when Jimmy Carter chose New York City as the unlikely site for one of his "town meetings," a neighborhood in Queens was the only place his advisors found suitable.

The borough has always been a mystery to most New Yorkers, who know it only from the airports and the World's Fairs. But Queens is also the U.S. Open tennis championships at Flushing Meadows; it's the Polar Bear Club in the icy waters of Jacob Riis Park in January; it's the 1969 Mets and

the 1969 lets and Shea Stadium; it's Riva Ridge crossing the finish line at Aqueduct with a new world's record for the mile and three-sixteenths. Queens is the United Nations General Assembly meeting for the first time in a converted ice-skating rink in Flushing Meadows. It's the 1939–40 World's Fair held on the site of a city garbage dump, and the repeat performance at the same place for the 1964–65 exposition. It's the candy-striped stacks of Con Edison's most famous power generator, "Big Allis," whose historic malfunctions have been responsible, in part, for the great New York power blackouts of 1965 and 1977. It's the annual Halloween gathering of magicians from around the world at a lonely tombstone in Machpelah Cemetery, where they break a ceremonial wand over the remains of Harry Houdini on the anniversary of his death, to show that his magic died when he died.

Queens is also the neighborhoods. It's the Greeks—and almost all of the city's hot dog and pretzel vendors—in Astoria. It's the Colombians and Venezuelans—and almost all of the city's major cocaine importers—in Jackson Heights. It's the Irish—and thousands of the city's bartenders—in Woodside. It's the Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans—and thousands of the city's restaurant owners—in Flushing. It's New York's black elite in the mansions of St. Alban's. It's New York's impoverished blacks in the slums of Arverne, Hammels, and South Jamaica. It's the Israelis of Forest Hills, the WASPs of Forest Hills Gardens, the mobsters of Malba, the Hasids of the Rock-aways, and the Archie Bunkers of Middle Village.

Queens has been home to John and Ethel and Lionel Barrymore, and the rest of that hard-drinking family, who lived in an actors' and artists' colony that thrived in Bayside in the twenties and thirties, next to the homes of June Lockhart and W. C. Fields. It's been home to jazz greats like Louis Armstrong in Corona and Bix Beiderbecke in Sunnyside. It's been home to

“Mad Bomber” George Metesky, who, like most New Yorkers, had a grievance against Con Ed when they locked him up in the Creedmore State Psychiatric Hospital. And it’s been home to two former steak restaurateurs named Steve Rubell and Ian Schrager, who went on to make and lose a fortune as co-owners of the notorious Studio 54 discotheque. Later, if you asked them where they were from, they would never say, “from Queens,” but always, “from 54th Street.”

Queens has always occupied a special place in the annals of crime. The bank that Willie Sutton finally went to jail for robbing was in Queens. The bar where the multimillion-dollar computer defrauding of Equity Insurance was hatched was in Queens. The largest loan-sharking and bookmaking ring ever cracked in the U.S. was in Queens.

Queens was also the Ruth Snyder-Judd Gray story, one of the most celebrated murder trials in U.S. history. The two lovers were accused of plotting to murder her advertising executive husband, and in 1927, when Ruth Snyder finally went to the chair, the whole world got to watch her die. A *Daily News* photographer with a smuggled-in ankle camera recorded the grim execution scene, and the contortions of Ruth Snyder’s body in her last tortured moments went around the world. The *News* photographer went to jail, briefly, and laws were passed “reforming the execution ceremony,” limiting the number of witnesses, and curbing such abuses in the future.

And Queens was the Alice Crimmins trial, another spectacular involving an accused murderess. The red-haired cocktail waitress from Kew Gardens Hills was convicted of killing her two kids, four-year-old Missy and five-year-old Eddy, Jr., after a sensational murder trial filled with

revelations about her lurid love life and Mafia involvement, featuring neurotic witnesses that captivated the nation's press.

Jailed in 1965, Alice Crimmins is free today.

But perhaps most damning of all, Queens was also Kitty Genovese. The fate of the twenty-eight-year-old white woman, whose tragic ordeal made her name a household word across the country, represents one of the ugliest things the city has to offer. In March of 1964, Kitty was followed from a bar to her Kew Gardens home by a black assailant who beat and sexually abused her before stabbing her to death. The attack took place on the grounds of a large apartment building where she lived, but not a single person answered her repeated cries for help—not a single person intervened, called the police, or so much as lifted a finger to save her. One elderly couple, hearing the commotion, actually pulled their chairs up to the windows to watch the spectacle, and at least thirty-eight witnesses sat mutely through the prolonged thirty-five-minute attack. Only after the killer had fled, and the body was still, did someone bother to call the police.

It was the classic "I don't want to get involved but somebody ought to do something about it" syndrome. As such, the Kitty Genovese killing became a national symbol of public apathy.

(Later, when a judge on Queens Boulevard sentenced Kitty's killer to death in the electric chair, the spectators in the courtroom's gallery broke into applause. Winston Moseley's sentence was subsequently commuted to life in prison; he went on to get a B.A. in sociology, and became a bit of a jailhouse lawyer at Attica. In a few years, he will be eligible for parole.)

If the tragedy of Kitty Genovese reflected badly on Queens, this too would pass. It would pass as almost everything else in Queens does sooner or later. The mood would shift. The one-shot apathy that could kill a Kitty Genoevese would give way in turn to a militant vigilantism that might have

kept her alive. But this would be a one-shot happening too, and eventually it would be pushed aside by something else, equally fleeting.

For Queens, as the *Post*'s Murray Kempton would write, "is the capital city of the one-shot epic. Just one triumphant World Series and then no more. Just one all-conquering Superbowl and then no more. And now just one Lufthansa. For Queens there is, in each successive category of human endeavor, only one gaudy night whose like the world will never see again. Neither will Queens, in that particular sport; but we can count on her to surprise us in some other."

For two golden decades of its history, at the dawning of the motion picture industry, Queens served as the Hollywood of its day. The early one- and two-reelers were shot in primitive studios clustered around the factories of Long Island City and the railroad rights-of-way in Sunnyside. From 1905 to 1925, film pioneers like Edwin S. Porter and D. W. Griffith did much of their work here, and a company called Famous Players Lasky Corporation —with names like Ben Hecht, Charles MacArthur, and Ernst Lubitsch behind it—got off to a modest start in Queens. As the movies came of age, the money men decided New York's winters were too cold and its labor costs too high, so they packed up their cameras and moved the industry, lock, stock, and barrel, to California. The old studios came to look like a ghost town in one of their films. And Queens' Famous Players Lasky went on to become Paramount Pictures.

One legacy from that era lives on. Shortly after the turn of the century, construction began on the Queensboro Bridge, linking Manhattan with Queens at 59th Street. When the ornate cantilevered span was completed in 1909, the early movie moguls used it to get to work from their swank East

Side apartments nearby. Years passed and the industry went west, but the image of that unforgettable bridge must have lingered, for it was used as a romantic backdrop in countless Hollywood films in the twenties, thirties, forties, and fifties. The tradition continues to this day. Woody Allen used the bridge for a love scene in his recent *Manhattan*.

As narrator Nick Carraway phrased it more than a half-century ago in *The Great Gatsby:*

> The city seen from the Queensboro Bridge is always the city seen for the first time, in its first wild promise of all the mystery and the beauty in the world.
>
> "Anything can happen now that we've slid over this bridge," I thought; "anything at all…"

CHAPTER NINE

Before

“It doesn’t make sense,” Jaroslav Keybl kept saying as he plowed through the paperwork on his desk for the hundredth time on that ice-cold Wednesday afternoon. “It just doesn’t make sense at all.”

Two thousand dollars, after all, don’t just disappear without a trace, like the elephant from the stage in the old Houdini trick.

But that was what seemed to have happened. Nothing was amiss. The airway bills were in order; so were the manifests and the invoices and the lading forms, and the whole mountain of foolscap that is the bureaucratic heart of every airline’s cargo operations. Everything had been signed and certified, checked and double-checked. Everything had been done according to Hoyle. The shipment seemed intact. None of the seals had been tampered with.

It was all as it should be. Except that somewhere along the line, two thousand dollars had simply vanished from an overseas cash shipment—vanished, like the elephant, into thin air, without a clue or a trace, and no one could figure out where.

The hard-faced German bosses were at a loss. They could have no quarrel with the way the routine was carried out. And their hard-faced German security staff—known scornfully among the loaders as “the

Gestapo”—was at a loss too. They could find no one at whom to point an accusing finger.

And poor Jaroslav Keybl, the Lufthansa supervisor on duty that day, could only scratch his beard and shake his head and wrinkle his brow and puzzle over the papers one more time.

Later that day, Keybl would tell a colleague, “There’s something that’s not quite right about the whole thing. It’s fishy; it doesn’t add up. Don’t ask me why, but the one thing I know for sure is that we haven’t heard the last of this.”

It was 4:30 P.M. on Wednesday, December 6, 1978, just five days before the Lufthansa Six were to strike. Keybl had been right; it didn’t add up. Keybl had been right; it would be a long time before they heard the last of it.

Someone had been very busy.

That Wednesday morning a shipment of money, somewhere between $200,000 and $1 million, arrived at Building 261 after a direct flight from Frankfurt, Germany. The shipment was earmarked for the Republic National Bank of New York’s corporate base at 452 Fifth Avenue. It had been counted, sealed, and certified before leaving Europe. At Kennedy, it went right from the plane, under the watchful eyes of two armed guards, to the Customs staging desk. Then it was locked in the Val Room. Half an hour passed. An armored car service, IBIS, arrived to take the shipment to Republic National. The money was hauled out of the Val Room. According to routine, five men—one Customs agent, two Lufthansa employees, and two of the guards from the armored car—were on hand when the cash shipment was cracked open. The money was removed and examined, but not counted. Then it was replaced, and the package closed up again. The shipment was next certified at a fixed amount, resealed, placed in the truck,

and finally sent via the armed couriers from IBIS to its Fifth Avenue destination.

The phone call came a little while later. The shipment had been received intact, the seal on the money pouch had not been broken, the papers had all been signed on the dotted line. But when the banking officials at Republic National counted the bills—and they counted them again and again, since it didn't make sense to them, either—they discovered they were short some two thousand dollars.

A shortage like that, relatively minor but still quite distressing, happens only once or twice a year, according to airline sources, and usually through accident or theft or human error or auditing breakdowns. Once or twice a year. With a $10 million caper just five days away, the timing was simply not to be believed. Once or twice a year. The timing was such that investigators soon became convinced it was no coincidence.

It is still not clear, even today, where along the line the money vanished—it could have been in Europe, or aboard the jet, or in the high-value safe room that was hit five days later, or in the armored car in transit, or even in the bank itself. Nothing was ever proved, nobody was ever charged, and no one will ever serve a day in jail for it. But investigators have their suspicions, all the same.

They believe the strike was made in the thirty-minute period after the goods were locked in the Val Room and before they were handed over to IBIS. This would mean the culprit had to be someone who had access to the blockhouse, someone who carried the keys and knew the combinations. And it had to be someone who was in the vicinity at the precise time the valuables were there.

The list was narrowed down to six possible suspects—all long-term Lufthansa employees. One of the names on the list was that of a graying,

blue-eyed, six-foot-one, forty-seven-year-old freight transshipment supervisor named Louis Werner.

This was the latest of a number of variations Jimmy the Gent had worked into the original Gruenewald-Werner Plan. It's not quite clear how he managed it, but he told Mr. Y in the bar one night, "This is the tail that wags the body."

For a meager two-thousand-dollar theft, it was the perfect crime. But it was the meagerness of it all that bothered Jaroslav Keybl so much. It was perfect all right, except for one thing: it didn't make any sense. As Keybl had mused prophetically, more to himself than to anyone else, it just didn't add up. There had to be something else behind it. The take was so small it hardly seemed to justify the tremendous effort someone had obviously gone through to get to it.

Only five days later, and after it was already too late, would it be established what was behind that mysterious two-thousand-dollar shortage. Only with the benefit of hindsight, after Building 261 had been stripped of its millions, would that paltry theft be seen in proper perspective as the foil that it was.

There was no Nero Wolfe around to deduce that it was all an elaborate smokescreen, no Miss Marple to recognize that this was a master stroke of a master criminal setting the stage for an encore that would really be the show itself, no Sherlock Holmes to anticipate what would come next and be there in time to stop it. There was only poor Jaroslav Keybl, the cargo boss, with his vague suspicions and his nagging doubts, and these he mostly kept to himself.

Two days passed. An internal investigation was under way. All the cargo handlers were under clouds of suspicion. There was talk of lie-detector tests. There were thinly veiled threats of Christmas firings unless somebody talked. There was speculation that the FBI would be brought in. Nobody was considered innocent. New rules for monitoring valuables were promulgated overnight, and in Building 261 they talked of little else.

The scuttlebutt was expressed in four words: “Lou Werner did it.”

Two days passed. The feds and the local cops weren’t brought in, but Interpol in Paris was notified, apparently on the theory that the thief might have had a cohort in Europe. Lufthansa security began the interrogations. The new procedures for keeping an eye on the goods went into effect. Sinister-looking security chiefs stood all day in the warehouse with their arms folded, just watching. Very little work was done.

Two days passed. Into this climate of suspicion came a new element. A Boeing 727 landed on Kennedy’s Runway 31R and taxied up to the Lufthansa cargo hangar. On board, in addition to the usual assortment of German beers, was a bulky cash shipment of $6 million.

The money was being shipped from the Commerzbank in Frankfurt to its corresponding bank in New York, David Rockefeller’s Chase Manhattan. The bills were fifties and hundreds, and for the most part they were used, soiled, wrinkled, or torn. This is what bankers call “old money,” and it was about to be taken out of circulation. The money comes from U.S. Army bases, the tourist trade, and dollar exchanges. This was a standard procedure that most big banks carry out several times a month, though for obvious reasons they don’t make a point of advertising it. The money is taken to the Federal Reserve Bank, the central “bank for banks,” where it is counted in front of at least three witnesses, and then burned in front of at least five. The destroyed money is then scrupulously recorded—to prevent

inflationary growth in Ml, a measure of the money supply—and then it is replaced, bill for bill, with new currency.

Because the money is destined for the bonfire, and because it comes from so many sources, records are never kept of its serial numbers, which are seldom consecutive anyway. The money is untraceable.

This particular shipment of untraceable money would never make it to Chase Manhattan Bank, or to the bonfire, either. Somebody else had plans for it.

After the flight landed, eight Lufthansa employees—six more than usual—escorted the shipment to the Val Room. Three guards—two more than usual—were assigned to watch it. Four air-cargo traffic managers, three more than usual, were assigned to cull its paperwork. And two airline executives in Germany, two more than usual, were notified by Telex that it had been received unmolested and were assured that it would stay that way. Those execs had a big disappointment awaiting them.

When the Brink's truck arrived, shortly after the cargo flight, the tension in the loading bays was approaching the breaking point. It was 12:30 P.M. on Friday, December 8, 1978, just two days after the two thousand dollars had been missed, just three days before the $10 million would be missed.

Brink's truck number 69319 had been dispatched to pick up the money from Building 261 and whisk it to One Chase Manhattan Plaza on Liberty Street in lower Manhattan, from where the cash would go around the corner and across the street to the Federal Reserve Bank (the Fed) on Maiden Lane, and then up in smoke.

Pat Foley was driving Brink's truck number 69319 that day. He stayed outside on the loading ramp while guards Frank Crowley and John Curtain, handguns in holsters, went in to get the releases signed and cart out the money.

It was a standard procedure and they had done it ten thousand times. But this time they learned it would not be so standard. They came into a highly charged atmosphere very different from the easygoing place they were used to.

And now the Lufthansa security force found itself hoist on its own petard.

Ordinarily, anyone would sign for the goods, and they'd be released in minutes. But in light of the first mystery shortage, and the tougher new regulations that had taken effect as a result, no one was willing to take responsibility for them. All the employees insisted to the Brink's crew that only one man—the foreman in charge of the shipment itself—could take the responsibility for giving it out. That was what their new instructions said.

As luck would have it, that man was Lou Werner. Not surprising, perhaps—this was his job. But luck had very little to do with what happened next. Another plane had arrived on the tarmac. Werner knew from the freight schedule that it was due at almost exactly the same time that Brink's was due, and so he assigned himself to supervise the unloading of it. That was part of his job too, and he knew he couldn't be faulted for it.

Meanwhile, Brink's was waiting and waiting.

The security people were eager to get rid of the $6 million because it would mean one less headache for them, but they weren't about to break their own edicts when they were only forty-eight hours old. They also had no legal authority to turn over the goods. They couldn't fetch Werner from the plane either, because then there would be a gap somewhere else in their tight-knit security dragnet. They would be stuck with the money they were so obviously eager to get rid of, and they would be stuck with it until Monday, since Brink's didn't work on the weekend. They would be stuck

with it, unless Werner came back in time, and there was no reason to imagine that he would.

But he did come back. Eighty minutes after Brink's arrived, and just as they were on their way out the door, Lou Werner showed up. Why? Two possible theories present themselves. One is that he wanted to cement his alibi by making every effort to look as if he were being helpful. The other is that he had an opportunity, in a single gesture, to play a trump card and laugh with spite in the faces of German security. Given the Werner personality, the second theory makes more sense.

When Werner showed up in the Customs Examination Room, there must have been an audible, collective sigh of relief. Now the shipment could at last be cleared.

But Werner told them to guess again. "If I'm a suspect in that two thousand dollars from Wednesday," he said to security, "then I can't deliver this stuff unless a supervisor is around while I do it. It can't be one of you guys; your own memo said that yesterday."

So security scrambled up to the cafeteria to pull a supervisor off his lunch break to oversee the arrangements, which were really not so very complicated in the first place. Minutes passed. Curtain and Crowley, the Brink's men, were getting edgy. They were already behind schedule, they had other pickups to make, and they had left Foley alone in a truck that probably contained millions for too long as it was.

But security soon reappeared with a middle-level supervisor—still munching a sandwich—in tow. Werner wasn't satisfied. "For so much money it has to be one of the big bosses," he said. "You guys came down hard on us for that two thousand dollars a couple of days ago, and nobody wants to take a chance like that again. The other men in the Val Room feel the same way."

Werner was obviously enjoying his revenge. It wasn't easy to cow security, but he was doing a good job. "You come back with a big boss and I'll release this shipment, and not until then."

Security sprinted out again.

Now time started to favor Lou Werner, as the Brink's team got more and more restless. It would all come out later in court, as Lou Werner sat in the dock, and one of the Lufthansa employees who witnessed the exchange sat in the box and testified against him.

> Q: What happened then?
>
> A: I guess it was about two or five after two when he [Werner] was approached by the Brink's guard John [Curtain]. And Werner told him there was a previous problem about releasing a shipment and his supervisor is upstairs trying to get somebody to come down to assist in releasing the shipments.
>
> Q: What did the Brink's guard say?
>
> A: The Brink's guard then said he had to call his office to find out what they wanted him to do. The Brink's guard then left and made a telephone call to his office. And he was instructed that he would have to—I think the word used was "pull out," or "leave."
>
> Q: What happened after that?
>
> A: He then went to Mr. Werner and told him he had to pull out. Mr. Werner told him, words to the effect, "Do your thing."

After ninety-five minutes, Brink's truck number 69319 drove off. And almost immediately afterwards, the door to the Customs Examination

Office burst open. It was security, with Jaroslav Keybl and three other executives from the pinnacles of the Lufthansa brass. They stomped into the room, and security demanded, “Are you satisfied now?”

Q: What happened then?
A: Mr. Werner said, as soon as they walked in the room, he said, “You are late, gentlemen, Brink’s has just left.”

He must have been gloating as he said it.

For Lou Werner had kept the promise he’d made not so long ago in Robert’s Lounge. By delaying a critical $6 million shipment, he’d made sure there would be plenty of filthy lucre left behind in the Val Room over the weekend. It would be waiting there for the bandits when they stormed in to take it away. He knew Brink’s would never get another crack at it. “You are late,” he repeated. “Brink’s is gone.”

Later, investigators would marvel at how intricately everything had been worked out: how Wednesday’s theft on December 6 had made Friday’s Brink’s truck turnabout on December 8 possible; how Friday’s Brink’s truck turnabout on December 8 had made the record-book figures in Monday’s heist on December 11 possible; how each stage, though piddling by itself, made the next stage possible; how each stage camouflaged the one that would follow it; and best of all, at least as far as the Jimmy the Gents of the world were concerned, how each stage protected the men who had organized it, and exposed the poor fools who had to carry it out and do all the work. Lou Werner was the only person who would ever be convicted of a Lufthansa offense.

After the Lufthansa Six made their $10 million grubstake, giving them in a trice enough capital to buy 160,000 shares of IBM, some of the mysteries started falling into place.

Jaroslav Keybl had wondered why only two thousdand dollars had been stolen. Now it's believed that the crook who grabbed it—whether it was Werner or an unknown collaborator—probably had room for little more in his pockets, since the missing bills were all twenties and he'd pocketed a hundred of them as it was. But more important, the purpose of the theft was not mere theft. The two G's the crook walked off with were only loose change—subway fare and drinking money—compared to what he was after. The purpose was disruption, and the operation was so successfully disruptive, at least as far as the mob was concerned, that it raised suspicions in all the wrong places and lulled them in all the right places.

It was a smokescreen, that two thousand dollars, and under its billowing cover Lou Werner could take a rare stab at playing the innocent, lead German security to pull its hair out, turn Brink's around empty, load up the Val Room, and then disappear like a shadow from the scene when six guys from Queens arrived to empty it.

He had followed his orders. And when he went home from work that Friday night, he knew the early-hours super-heist on Monday morning had the green light. He had done his job. Soon it would be time to dispose of Lou Werner.

The tail had already begun to wag the body.

In those last few days before they rolled down the Van Wyck Expressway toward JFK, Jimmy the Gent was holed up in the Otel Bryant halfway

house, directing the plotting via a series of pay-phone-to-pay-phone calls, occasionally heckling the therapist in the transactional analysis sessions.

His intermediary in these last hours was Theresa (Terry) Ferrara, the twenty-seven-year-old brunette bombshell the press insisted on calling the “mystery woman of Lufthansa,” since they couldn’t begin to figure out where she fit into the whole sordid picture. It was Ferrara, acting as a well-paid go-between, who relayed Burke’s orders to Werner. This was a crucial role because Burke didn’t want to risk any face-to-face contact with his pawn at the airport that might be noticed by airline people with loose tongues.

So he sent Ferrara to Building 261. The mystery woman made several trips to the freight-forwarding desk. Posing as a customer, she’d present a package stuffed with old newspapers and garbage from the kitchen to the agent in charge, saying, “I’d like to send this to my old mother in Italy.” The name was a fake, and the address she gave didn’t exist, and the packages all wound up in a dead-letter box in Milan, stamped “undeliverable,” but the scheme served its purpose: she had an excuse to be in the building.

After ostensibly transacting her business, Ferrara would meet Lou Werner in the lobby downstairs and transact the business that had really brought her out to the cargo hold in the first place.

On her very first trip, it’s believed Werner slipped her a thick sheaf of papers that she smuggled out of the building and brought back to Burke—they were the advance manifests, the precious advance manifests. These forms told what goods would be coming in, on what planes, on what days, and how much they were worth.

On the basis of this information (which included the shipments to Republic National and Chase Manhattan), Burke decided on what day to

strike. As he sat at the counter amid the dregs and the down-and-outers of the Cosmic Coffee Shop one day, he also cooked up the elaborate intrigue that would make it all possible.

The manifests came in triplicate, which made them easy to swipe, but the ones that wouldn't be missed were the third copies behind the carbon, which made them difficult to read. These were the ones that went from Werner to Ferrara to Burke to the greasy crumb-laden counter of the Cosmic Coffee Shop. It was a strange scene: Jimmy the Gent poring over pink forms, squinting over them to make out the barely discernible type, spinning out new ways of making the $20 million dream come true, refining the crime of the century, shaping it into its final form, as the lowlife in one of the sleaziest joints on Broadway came and went all around him.

When he had the plan to dip into the Republic National shipment for two thousand dollars, thus delaying the Chase Manhattan shipment for $6 million over the weekend, thus giving his gang a chance to steal it, along with whatever else happened to be in the Val Room, it was Ferrara who took his instructions to Werner.

And when Werner put out the word that he had amassed another pile of paperwork, it was Ferrara who was sent to pick it up. Again she air-freighted a carton of garbage to her old mother in Italy. And again she smuggled the documents out of the building and brought them to Burke.

This was the shipping list that Burke had long sought. It told what goods were already in the Val Room, where they were from and where they were bound, and how much they were worth. It also gave the six- or eight-digit serial numbers for each of the shipments. Now all a cargo thief would have to do was match the serial numbers on the forms with those numbers pasted on the bottom right-hand corners of the cartons themselves. That way he would know exactly what he was getting without having to waste

time opening anything, and it would save him from looking through thousands of boxes. Now they were ready to roll.

Ferrara was paid off—handsomely—and dismissed. Her work was over. But as the mob was to learn belatedly, it wasn't that easy to dismiss Terry Ferrara. It was no accident that she had proven so adept as a courier of messages and documents, no accident that she was a natural as a go-between, bouncing like a ping-pong ball between two conspirators, no accident that she handled the assignment like a professional. She *was* a professional. It was no accident, because she had been doing all those things as a paid informant for the feds for three years, and for the Nassau County junk agents for two years. The mob would find this out, but only when it was already too late to do anything about it except get even with her.

Terry Ferrara led a bizarre double life. A Long Island beautician who found her unisex hairdressing shop too slow for her, she found more excitement in hanging around mobsters and drug runners. Perhaps she eventually got bored of that too, for when the FBI approached her and asked if she'd do some work for them—for a stipend—she readily agreed. But she placed them in a difficult situation, for while she provided them with some valuable intelligence, she continued to pursue her mob activities. In the end, the G-men decided the information she supplied them with was so good that they would have to look the other way and ignore her own illicit activities. Later, the Nassau narcs would make the same decision.

So while Terry Ferrara blew the whistle on the drug-smuggling bid Joey Beck had organized in the Rockaways, allowing the feds to break it up, she also helped set up drug runs of her own, and these tended to work.

It was a remarkable price to pay for her cooperation, and to this day—and for obvious reasons—the FBI and the Nassau narcs deny she was on

their payroll.

With Lufthansa, Terry Ferrara decided to say nothing. At first. The profits were so handsome simply for running a few papers back and forth between Queens and Manhattan that she didn't spill a word of it to her government contacts. If she had, the whole epic of Building 261 might have been busted before it ever got off the ground, which would have meant less money for her. If Ferrara had done that, the government would not have paid her a fraction of what the mob did, and so it was in her best interests to say nothing. Until it was all over, that is.

Ferrara had a choice: she could take money either from the feds or from the mob. She elected to take it from both.

She worked for Jimmy the Gent until he handed her the wad of bills when the crime was over. Then she started talking to the feds to tap another source of income. She was to do a lot of damage to a lot of people before they caught up with her and killed her. To this day, it's not known whether it was Joey Beck's drug-running gang or Tony Ducks' airport-robbing gang that finally ordered Flatlands Tony to make the hit; either one had a reason to. Three months after the record drug bust and two months after the record airport heist, she was dead.

But even from the grave, Theresa (Terry) Ferrara is getting the last laugh. The wealth of tips and clues and leads she provided is part of the arsenal used even today by the feds in New York against organized crime. The investigations that were spurred by the information she provided bear fruit still. And the people who crossed Terry Ferrara, and even the people who killed her, may someday be brought to justice on the strength of this legacy.

But all of that seemed more than a trillion light-years away on the day Fat Frankie the Driver slid behind the wheel of the shiny black Cadillac limousine and went to round up the felons.

It was Sunday, December 10, 1978, shortly after midnight. It was a week after the first airway bills had changed hands from Werner to Ferrara to Burke. It was four days after Jaroslav Keybl had shaken his head and wondered where the two thousand dollars had gone, and wondered why that was all that was lifted; it was two days after a couple of Brink's guards, defeated by bureaucracy, security lapses, and other confusions, turned around in truck #69319 and drove off without the $6 million they had come to pick up; and it was only one calendar day, or just five hours on the clock, before the record-book keeper would be examining a new claimant for the dubious accolades that accompany the world's biggest robbery.

Fat Frankie the Driver's first chore was to round up the stickup men.

Gas Station Joey Manri he pulled out of a poker game in Brooklyn. Paola (the Vamp) LiCastri he dragged out of a salvage yard; the Vamp had just strongarmed his way into Queens. John Angelo Sepe he yanked out of a gin mill in Valley Stream. Mr. Y, always more discreet than the others, arranged to meet him at a streetcorner in Staten Island. With a quartet of hoodlums sitting in his back seat, Fat Frankie then headed for Robert's Lounge—that good old, dependable, tried-and-true operational base for almost every serious assault on John F. Kennedy International Airport in the last ten years.

After dropping them off, he wheeled towards the Midtown Tunnel for a slightly more delicate operation.

The Community Treatment Center in the Otel Bryant was a far cry from the old *carette*, the dreaded Siberian prison van, a portable cage that was locked in Moscow by a key that couldn't unlock it; that key was waiting

seven thousand miles away, somewhere out on the frozen wastes of Siberia. But the CTC was still a jail of sorts, and as such it would probably frown on the notion of giving prisoners leaves to steal $20 million, though after all, as Burke never tired of pointing out, he was on the work-release program.

The old Benjamin-Franklin-in-the-palm-of-the-hand trick may have been all it required to spring Two-Gun Tommy and Jimmy the Gent for their night's labors. There was only one prospective problem; they had to be back by 8:00 A.M. for the routine room check the guards carried out every morning. It was the difference between having and blowing an alibi. If they could be done with all the things they had to do, and back in their rooms by eight, they were home. They could always say in court, "How could it be me? I was in jail then." And the sign-in/sign-out forms would back them up. But if they missed that 8:00 A.M. deadline…

It was probably better not to think about it. Fat Frankie the Driver opened the doors, Two-Gun Tommy got in the back, Jimmy the Gent jumped in the front, and they were off on the familiar, oft-traveled roads that led to Robert's Lounge.

It was 1:30 A.M., December 11, less than two hours before the big holdup would begin.

Someone raised the toast that Little Marty had turned into a kind of byword when he first drank it more than two months ago at the same bar: "Here's to twenty million dollars and zero zero cents."

And then Jimmy the Gent said the words that, in a slightly different form, would echo through bar after bar after he made his score: "When this is over, we'll be back and we'll all have a drink on Lufthansa!"

The six stickup men huddled at a table in the back, rehearsing their roles, looking rather comical in their robbers' regulation dark clothing.

Few of the movie cliches that go with the hours of prelude before a big job were in evidence here. There was no synchronizing of watches, no one to declare solemnly, “When this is over, Rocky, if I’m still here, I’m going straight.”

But it was a remarkable scene, all the same. A few of the Catholic thieves crossed themselves. Then Frenchie McMahon came in and started passing out the ski masks. Next he opened a briefcase and started passing out the firearms and the handcuffs.

“Just in case,” said Mr. Y, as he oiled a .38-caliber handgun.

“There will be no ‘in case,’” said Jimmy the Gent, and he eyed Mr. Y sternly.

In addition to the stickup men, Stacks was there, and Little Marty and Richard Eaton and Anthony Rodriguez and Frenchie McMahon. They all had missions to perform after the heist was over, in other places, and they weren’t needed here now. In fact, they were probably underfoot. But they had come all the same. They had come as people always come to bars to watch the great sporting events, clustering by the television set to look at the stars of the World Series or the Superbowl or the Stanley Cup finals. Only this time the stars were right in front of them. This time the bar itself would make history. For this was the “top sport of all,” as Jimmy Breslin was to write, “and there can be no greater athletic endeavor than the robbing of big business.”

Jimmy the Gent looked at his watch. “In an hour they’ll be going to lunch at Lufthansa,” he said. “Let’s roll.”

Fat Frankie the Driver had the limo waiting outside, and the Lufthansa Six headed out the door, surrounded by a gaggle of thieves, mobsters, wise guys, insiders and other well-wishers.

Robert’s Lounge, with its rich heritage of gambling, was launching its greatest gamble yet.

Fat Frankie stopped at a residential street in the Flushing section of Queens, and his passengers got out. He turned around and sped back toward the saloon, for he would be making several other trips that long night.

The car was waiting just where Joseph M. had said it would be waiting. It had a full tank of gas and plenty of oil and water; the tires didn’t look like they were about to go flat, and the muffler muffled just as it was supposed to. It was all you could ask for.

And now, with the Vamp at the wheel, the black 1978 Ford Econoline van of the 150 series, New York State license plate number 508-HWM, headed for the highway and the airport.

Jimmy the Gent, as usual, did most of the talking.

There was only one van instead of the requisite two because of Two-Gun Tommy’s monumental screw-up; he didn’t say a word about that; but he did give DeSimone a good dressing-down for having had too much to drink that night. There was an argument about whether to use headlights or not as the van approached the Lufthansa cargo building. Burke decided they would keep them on to give everything the appearance of normalcy.

Finally, the last lecture.

“Whatever it is that makes you unique, whatever it is that makes people remember you, don’t do it. Any idiosyncrasies you’ve got, keep them to yourself. In a couple of hours from now, that place will be swarming with cops, and they’re all going to be asking those Nazis what you did, how you talked, whether you did anything weird enough to help them figure out who you were.

“You’ve all got records, or most of you, and it’s not going to be that hard to identify you if you give the bastards half a chance. So don’t.

“Joey, you walk with a limp. Tonight you just can’t do it. Paola, you can’t even open your mouth once without telling anybody who’s got an ear that you come from Sicily. So just don’t talk if you can possibly help it. That’s why you’re the wheelman.”

He looked again at his watch. It was 2:50 A.M. “In ten minutes now, they’ll be going to lunch at Lufthansa,” he said.

The blackened scenery of southern Queens shot past as they sped down the Van Wyck Expressway. Then Jimmy the Gent exchanged a glance with Mr. Y, who was still puffing contentedly away at his H. Upmann cigar in the back seat. Mr. Y took the hint and the H. Upmann went out the window. Without his trademark, maybe the law would never figure out who he was.

The orange sparks of the cigar bounced up and down on the Van Wyck, and the lights of Building 261 shone in the distance.

CHAPTER TEN

During

> “The cheaper the crook, the gaudier the patter.”
>
> Dashiell Hammett
> *The Maltese Falcon*

If you’re going south on the Van Wyck and you get off at the Rockaway Boulevard exit, make a left turn and go straight for half a mile until you cross 150th Street. Make a right turn on 150th Street until a bridge takes you over the two service roads and the six roaring lanes of the Belt Parkway. Then continue down 150th Street for some two hundred yards.

That squat but sprawling three-story, white-faced building looming up starkly on your left hand side is Lufthansa Cargo. Words to that effect in big, bare, neon lights identify it for the Long Island commuters on the Belt who pass nearby twice a day. If you look at it closely—and only people who work there or have business there or who steal from there have a reason to do that—you’ll see a much smaller sign in a forgotten corner of the building, labeling the uninspired structure by its official, functional, bureaucratic designation: Building 261.

This was the target of the sextet that had come to knock over the Red Baron. The bandits paused briefly in the parking lot. It was here in this same parking lot, under far more relaxing circumstances, that the same six men had once enjoyed a picnic of take-out sandwiches and beer from the Pastrami King. That was less than a month ago. Now they were here for a different purpose entirely, and the tension was murderous. This account is based on the story of that evening that one of the bandits related to a friend, and that the friend then related to the author.

Jimmy the Gent looked at his watch again. It was 3:12 A.M. There was no turning back now, and everyone must have realized it when he said, “For twelve minutes now, they’ve been having lunch at Lufthansa.”

He paused and looked about the van. All the men in it had just reached a kind of threshold in their lives, and for some, the next stage would be rather grim. That wasn’t his department, but he must have known there would be unfortunate endings to what he was beginning tonight, and lots of one-act lives that would never see their second acts.

He looked at his watch again. It was 3:14 A.M. “For fourteen minutes now, they been having lunch at Lufthansa,” he said. “I think by now we’ve probably given the stragglers enough time to get to the cafeteria, and the rest of the krauts enough time to get interested in their main course.”

He looked again at the faces in the van, and fingered the rosary beads on the rearview mirror. “Let’s go ruin their dessert,” he said cheerily. “Let’s roll.”

Police say it happened like this:

The men donned their ski masks, put their revolvers on safety, snapped the handcuffs into an unfastened position, shook hands solemnly, and then

pounced.

The van crept up to a padlocked gate on the west side of the building, away from the well-policed area where the employees and guards were centered. Here, at the far end of the grounds, the bandits had zeroed in on the most vulnerable part of the Lufthansa domain, the only place in the compound that wasn't guarded night and day. The reason for this unheard-of lapse in Teutonic vigilance was simple—this wasn't Lufthansa at all!

Lufthansa is the owner of the building, but it rents out a small amount of space at its western extremity to Aerolineas Argentinas (Argentine Airlines). The South American carrier is a much smaller concern than the German giant, and it occupies only a niche in the vast property. Its cargo operations are also small in scope, and unlike Lufthansa, which stays open twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, it keeps banker's hours over a five-day week. When the Argentinians go home for the day, their guards go home too.

The Germans were meticulous about protecting every inch of their own holdings. Until the two thousand dollars vanished and Jimmy the Gent went to work on them, they claimed there had never been a theft at Building 261. They had a good, efficient security system, and they had it down pat, but because they wouldn't spend an extra deutsche mark on something they didn't feel concerned them—the Argentinians—they undid the whole thing. They left one of their flanks wide open, and that was where the gang mounted its attack, and then the whole precious system came down like a house of cards. Jimmy the Gent had determined early on that Aerolineas Argentinas was "the back door into Lufthansa."

And now a ski-masked figure emerged from the van and approached the padlocked gate at the far end of the building. He cut the heavy chain with a bolt cutter, somehow without touching off the alarm there, opened the gate

in the chain-link fence, and that was it—that van had slipped through the "airtight" security net with remarkable ease.

(In the investigation that followed, everyone wondered why the alarm, which was wired to the Port Authority's Central Police Desk, did not go off. It was revealed that the Argentinians, apparently to save power, routinely turned off the buzzer system at the end of every workday. Somehow, the thieves had found out about it.)

One of the intruders then closed the gates behind the van and carefully put the chain back together to make it appear that nothing was amiss. Next, the van drove around the back of the building, skirting the edge of the tarmac and weaving in and out among the planes that would be unloaded in the morning. The driver consulted the homemade map of the grounds which Lou Werner had provided, then backed into a ramp that led to a garage door, which in turn led into the hangar itself. The next step was the "overcoming of the personnel," as Peter Gruenewald had expressed it in court testimony, in his original draft of the Plan.

But this "overcoming" was done with a few unnecessary flourishes that Gruenewald had never intended. Guard Kerry Whalen was making his rounds outside the hangar when one of the gunmen spotted him. Gas Station Joey blew out of the van, pulled out a .45, chased Whalen when he started to flee, and subdued him with a pistol-whipping, pounding the butt of the gun again and again against the crown of his skull, until finally his cronies yanked him away. Whalen wasn't seriously hurt, and he'd walk out of the Kennedy Medical Center in a few hours with nothing more than eight stitches in his head and a bad bump. But it was completely unnecessary. The next hour would bring out the ugliest side of most of the hoods.

It was predictable, of course. Gas Station Joey had earned his nickname when he slugged a cop across the face with the nozzle of a gasoline pump

after he was interrupted robbing a filling station of forty-five dollars. An up-from-the-docks “wharfie” who hadn’t really come very far up, he was still most comfortable with a shiv or a baling hook in his hands. With company that cheap, anything could happen.

No, it wasn’t the way Gruenewald had envisioned it, and later, in the isolation of protective custody, talking of the way the workers had been overcome, he would shake his head ruefully and say, “My plan would have made a much cleaner robbery.”

Perhaps. But even Jimmy the Gent, whose own alias comes from his reputation as the gentleman of crime, could do little to keep his troops in line at this stage. In the heat of the action, the difference between an ivory-tower theorist of crime like Gruenewald and the rough-and-tumble street urchins like Two-Gun Tommy and Gas Station Joey and Paola the Vamp, who actually have to make the thing work, becomes all too clear.

After Kerry Whalen was walloped, the robbers forced him to deactivate a silent alarm they knew about. Then they led the bloodied guard up the ramp. Another employee, Rolf Rebmann, hearing the commotion, opened the back door of the building, and the thieves swarmed in, forcing him back at gunpoint. Now they revealed their thorough knowledge of the building and the habits of its workers. Taking one-of-a-kind magnetic keys from Whalen, they moved freely through the various security areas, rounding up two unwary employees they surprised in one of the rooms, brazenly calling them by their first names, and leading them up the back stairs.

The Gruenewald-Werner Plan stressed not taking the elevator, since the ringing of the bell might startle someone. So they took the stairs to the third floor cafeteria, where six other employees were on their lunch break, just as the crooks knew they would be, which saved them the trouble of rounding them up. It was this commando-like precision, along with the threat and the

use of bald force, that allowed the operation to go off like clockwork. The gunmen next invaded the cafeteria, parading their handcuffed prisoners in front of them; the blood dripping down Kerry Whalen's face provided proof that they meant business. In they came like an elite military unit, brandishing a sawed-off shotgun, a .45-caliber pistol, and four .38-caliber handguns. It was an impressive show of force. Who was going to argue?

Jimmy the Gent politely assured them they'd all be okay if they cooperated. He asked if the old Albanian man who waxes the floor had finished up and gone home. He had. One less person to worry about. But in counting up the workers, the crooks discovered there was one person missing—the German boss of the entire night crew. Until they had him, they wouldn't be so polite anymore.

Nine of the ten victims were manacled snugly in police-style come-alongs, tied together, gagged, and made to lie down on the floor. The Vamp, keeping his mouth shut as he'd been told, stood guard. No one dared raise his or her head for fear of a bullet. Somehow, even with his mouth closed and gloves on his hands and a ski mask over his face, the Vamp looked like a tough customer. No one stirred.

The other robbers pressed their hunt for the missing worker. A few death threats in the right places would solve that problem; the tenth man was made to take a little walk with the bandits.

Senior cargo agent John Murray had a wallet containing pictures of his wife and children, as well as identification that listed his address. John Angelo Sepe took the family pictures out and put a shotgun to Murray's head and said he and his family would die unless he found a way to get his boss out of commission. When Murray hesitated for a fraction of a second, Sepe picked up a phone and said he'd send a man over to his house right

now to take care of his wife. The bluff worked—though, it might not have been a bluff at all.

John Murray picked up the phone. “Better make the right call,” Sepe warned him, “or we’ll blow your head off.” Murray glanced up, and again the shotgun was leveled at his head. “Keep your head down and don’t look around.” Sepe obviously meant business, so Murray made the right call, looking down the barrel of a gun.

Rudy Eirich, a Lufthansa employee for twenty-one years, made a regular practice of working doggedly through the 3:00 A.M. to 4:00 A.M. lunch shift, and taking a sandwich at his desk. That was why he wasn’t in the cafeteria when the stickup men struck. As the boss of the night shift, he was charged with supervising the merchandising, warehousing, cargo, import, export, and servicing of aircraft, and Lufthansa never had a more loyal company man.

Eirich was pouring over some transfer invoices in a dimly lit corner of the vast warehouse when he heard the telephone ring. It was 3:25 A.M. “Frankfurt has a problem with one of our freighters,” John Murray was saying. “Unless you’ve got the necessary paperwork down there, you’d better come on up.”

So Eirich went on up, bounding up the stairs. He was trained overseas not to waste any time answering long-distance telephone calls—wasted seconds cost money. Lufthansa is a very profitable operation, and one of the reasons is undoubtedly its much-heralded, if much-exaggerated, reputation for efficiency. The airline, back by the billion-dollar equity of the German government, is literally rolling in wealth, which is perhaps understandable with men like Eirich on the payroll, men who will gladly sacrifice their lunch hours and bound up steps for the good of the company.

The American cargo slaves, of course, are something else again. Later, at the trial of one of them, Louis Werner, Eirich would tell the court what happened when he got to the head of the stairs:

> Q: Would you tell us what happened after you received the telephone call from Mr. Murray?
>
> A: I went up. I was jumped by four armed men on both sides. One of them held a sawed-off shotgun, which I have been told it was to my head, and told me I shouldn't be afraid, they wouldn't kill me if I would cooperate completely. They also told me they had all the other guys already, and walked me towards the cafeteria which is approximately twenty feet away.
>
> Q: What happened after you arrived at the cafeteria?
>
> A: At the cafeteria, I looked through the door. I saw all the fellows on the floor, facedown, and guarded by another man who was masked with some kind of plastic over his face. They told me under continuous threats, the shotgun to my head, that if I wouldn't cooperate, they would blow my head off, and I had better tell them the truth.

Now the bad guys had them all. They had swooped out of nowhere to take effective command of the cargo terminal. They had come around the back way instead of through the front door. They had veered away from scores of pitfalls that might have tripped them up. After only ten minutes, they had overpowered all eleven employees and two armed guards, roughing up several of them in the process, but only slightly. And this was the same Lufthansa that used to boast of its "fortresslike impenetrability" in

the plugs and house ads it sent its customers. It really hadn't been so impenetrable after all.

After John Murray had served his purpose by luring Eirich into the thieves' clutches, he was tied up and made to lie down with the others, under the watchful eyes of the Vamp. Then the crooks went to work on Eirich.

They had selected him to lead them into the Val Room because he was the ranking supervisor on duty that night and was probably more familiar with the intricacies of the alarm system than anyone else. He was also probably more likely to play hero than anyone else, and they had to watch out for him. But the death threats would take care of that too.

Q: What happened then?
A: For your information?
Q: Yes, sir.
A: I cooperated, cooperated fully.
Q: You would be foolish not to?
A: My main concern was to save my fellow workers' lives, and my own.
Q: Naturally.
A: I did it looking down a gun barrel.

Even under friendly questioning before a jury that would bring his co-worker, Lou Werner, to justice, the doubts still crept into Rudy Eirich's voice, and he bristled when he talked about what he had done. His was the predicament of the loyal company man—the type that always says "we" when talking about his firm—forced by circumstances to betray all his company's most sensitive secrets, and haunted by it, even though he never had a choice to do otherwise. Like the American generals in *Fail-Safe* who

had to give their most classified atomic secrets to, of all people, the Russians, Eirich had to spill to the worst possible people the tightly guarded facts he couldn't even share with his own wife.

He was led at gunpoint down the long corridor that leads from the office area back into the warehouse section of the building, then through the fireproof steel door that separates the two regions, then downstairs again, where the van was still waiting outside the loading-bay doors, just a few feet away from a big cargo jet. Eirich was ordered to open the doors so the vehicle could back into the hangar.

"What happened then?" he was asked, in an afternoon of testimony that helped send Lou Werner to jail:

> A: I opened the door. After I opened the door about just the height of a normal van or panel truck, a van came in immediately through the door and they asked me to shut the door down at once. I had to let it go up in order to let it go down again, and they were mad about this.
>
> Q: What happened after the door was closed?
>
> A: They walked me towards my office and during that time they told me also that they had a couple of men at my house stationed and if I don't cooperate they will kill my family. Also they told me during that walk towards the office that they knew all about the security arrangements which we have and especially about the workings of the inner and outer door—that you can't open the door, if you have the outer safe door open and you can't open the inner safe door.
>
> Q: What were they talking about?

A: To our vault, our Val Room, which consists of two parts, an outer part and an inner part.

Q: Where did you go with them as they were talking to you?

A: We went to my office, which was half a flight up. In front of the office I had to explain how to deactivate the security system.

Q: What did they say about it?

A: “We know all about it,” they said. Apparently this was not a correct statement. They knew generally, according to the impression I had, but not specific. The only specific thing they told me that they knew about was the opening of the inner and outer doors; and they knew at various points in the warehouse alarm buttons, but where they actually were located, they did not know.

Q: How do you know that?

A: Because otherwise they wouldn’t have asked me for it.

On this one assumption alone, Rudy Eirich was seriously mistaken. He thought what they wanted him to think. For this was part of the Plan: By feigning ignorance about the delicate mechanisms of the alarm system, the bandits hoped to persuade their victims that they knew nothing about it. In the case of Eirich, they apparently succeeded. But actually they knew it inside out, or at least as well as men who had never seen it could know it, men who were relying on a crudely sketched map and a few chats with a member of the “fifth column.” The idea was to convince the law, which would descend on the place en masse as soon as they left, that these were not pros possessed of inside information, but merely interlopers who had wandered in from the cold.

It didn’t quite work out that way. Their familiarity with the whole set-up showed through their clumsy attempts to disguise it. It was obvious, try as they might to conceal it, that someone had tipped them off, someone who made an honest living in the shadow of that alarm system, someone who now had chosen to make a dishonest living by betraying it. Soon, it would be obvious that it was Lou Werner, and then the Bureau of Prisons would assign him number 10880-158.

The attempt of the gunmen to make it look as though it had not been the proverbial inside job had been, at least in part, an attempt to cover up for Werner. But it was a half-hearted attempt, and when it was over they would leave him to stew in his own juices, to twist slowly, slowly in the wind. Soon, it would be time to dump Lou Werner.

The outlaws grilled Eirich about the alarm system, and Eirich thought what he was supposed to think about it, what they wanted him to think. Then the time had come to turn it off. His testimony again:

> Q: What happened then, when you got to the system?
>
> A: After I told them how to deactivate the system and how to insert the key, they discussed whether they should do it or I should do it, and they finally decided I should do it. They decided I know better how to do it than they do. They made me look at the shotgun again. I went in and deactivated our alarm system.
>
> Q: Would you tell the jury is this a complicated procedure, the deactivating of this alarm, or do you just flip a switch?
>
> A: No, you have to insert a specific key in a certain way.
>
> Q: Did you have that key with you?

A: Yes, I always carry it on me. I am the only one who has it.

Q: Did anybody tell you to produce a key?

A: Pardon me?

Q: Did anybody tell you to produce a key?

A: Not until this point.

Q: You took the key out of your pocket and you put it into the alarm box because they told you to deactivate the alarm?

A: Yes.

Q: And you explained to them how the alarm was deactivated; is that right?

A: Yes.

Q: Tell the jury what you had to tell those men.

A: I had to show them the key, the assert key. We have altogether three keys which contain the security keys for the vault and the alarm system. So I showed them which keys to use, pointed out how to insert it, and how to turn it precisely in order to put it into access position. They were not sure that I was really cooperating or not.

Q: The point is, and there is no criticism here, all I am saying to you, you explained to them how to shut the alarm off using this key; is that right?

A: Right.

Q: And they asked you questions about it; is that correct? As to whether or not you should do it or they should do it?

A: They debated that among themselves without asking me.

Q: And then it was decided by them that you should do it; is that correct?

A: That is correct.

Q: And did they watch you do it?

A: Oh, yes.

Q: And you did it; is that right?

A: I did it looking down a gun barrel.

Q: What happened then?

A: Well, during that time, they noticed there is a separate box there which is the telephone alarm. There is a red light that is continuously on. It shows that the system is operative. They, not knowing all the details of our system, did think for a while that I had cheated them and the red light went on and, in fact, would have triggered the alarm, but this was not the case.

Nor was it the case that that was what the robbers thought. They were just going through the motions again, faking it when they saw the red light, acting startled and suspicious because they figured that was what Rudy Eirich would expect them to do. They might have fooled Eirich, but they didn't fool the FBI. The robbers knew that red light was there right from the beginning, knew it had absolutely nothing to do with the warning system, knew it was always kept on, and knew it had something to do with the telephone hookups and therefore didn't concern them. Lou Werner had made a point of cautioning them about it a month ago.

With the alarm system silenced, and the tie-in with the Central Police Desk of the Port Authority cut off, the next step was the Val Room itself. Mr. Y, Jimmy the Gent, and John Angelo Sepe were to tackle this last formidable obstacle by themselves, with a little involuntary help from Rudy

Eirich. The others all had jobs to do. The Vamp stood guard over his captives; Two-Gun Tommy went out to check the main entrance in front, in case there were any unexpected arrivals; Gas Station Joey went to do the same thing out back in case a Port Authority motor patrol happened by.

It was 3:34 A.M.

The remaining thieves then proceeded to Lufthansa's ground-floor, high-value safe room. That's where the money was. The cinderblock vault had been cast in Germany by a distinctive process at the request of the airline, and there was nothing quite like it at JFK. That was no accident. Security personnel had recommended having a special vault custom-made because of the similarities and weaknesses of almost all other vault types available on the market. Most of those were vulnerable to burglar tools and a wide assortment of break-in devices, and as they said at Robert's Lounge, "If you've cracked one, you've cracked them all." This one was different. The locks and keys, the tumblers in the safe, even the four-foot-thick cinderblock casing of the Val Room itself had been cast from molds that were destroyed as soon as they were completed. Then they were placed aboard one of Lufthansa's own planes, freighted over from Europe, and installed in Building 261. It was literally the only one of its kind in the world.

The Val Room was actually two separate safe rooms, one inside the other. To enter the outer room, you have to be familiar with a whole battery of keys and combinations before you can budge the huge, steel-plated doors that command the entrance. Once you've done that, you've entered the blockhouse, but that's only the beginning. You have to close the doors behind you, using different keys and combinations, and you have to do it in a specific way within a specified period of time or an alarm goes off, an alarm independent of the one Eirich had turned off that December morning,

and hooked up to a different system entirely, an alarm that could only be stilled from inside the Val Room itself. Once you're in the outer room, you're in a strong room about fourteen by fourteen feet in floor area, fireproof and burglarproof, which contains a desk where cargo is logged, along with crate upon crate of valuables. But the real goodies are on the other side of another massive door. In order to get through that, you have to go through the long, involved process with keys and combinations all over again. Further, in order to open up the inner-room door, you have to close the outer-room door behind you. If you don't close it, another alarm goes off. And if you do close it, you might not be able to figure a way to open it up and get out again—the idea being that unwary thieves would find themselves trapped like a fly in a fly trap, between the inner and the outer doors.

Once you're in the inner room, you're in an even stronger strong room, about twenty by ten feet in floor area, which is resistant to fire, to an acetylene torch, to the fingers of the city's most dexterous safecrackers, and to scores of low-grade explosives. An armor-piercing rocket fired from a bazooka might be able to blast it open, but you'd have to fire it with your back against the outer door as you aimed it at the inner door just fourteen feet away, and while in theory it would give you access to millions, you'd probably be too dead to enjoy the windfall.

The same convoluted process has to be repeated in reverse. If the inner-room door is open, you can't open the outer-room door. In order to leave the Val Room, you have to close the inner door, and unless you have the keys in your pocket and the combinations in your head, you can't do that either. The place is designated for instant conversion into a jail cell for the unwary.

The construction was perfect. It was inviolable, unassailable, impenetrable. At least on paper. But there was one flaw in the whole set-up,

just one hitch that ruined the whole thing: if you held a sawed-off shotgun to the night manager's head and threatened to blow it off and then kill his family in the bargain, you could get to the treasures of that Val Room as easily as you could steal a newspaper from a blind newsstand dealer.

Later, in court, Rudy Eirich would tell what happened next:

> Q: What took place when they led you from your office?
>
> A: I have left my office and they walked me down without even asking where to go—they push me, with the gun to my head, towards our vault. The van, at that time, was parked directly in front of the vault.
>
> Q: What happened when you arrived at the vault?
>
> A: Arriving a the vault they asked me to open the vault door, which I did. They first told me how much I probably loved my wife, and how badly I probably wanted to see my kids again, and how a lot of people probably wanted to see me too, in one piece, and not having to throw a lot of flowers on top of my grave in the cemetery. Then they made me look closely again into the barrel of the shotgun.
>
> Q: Then what happened?
>
> A: I opened the vault door, two guys jumped in and the first thing they did was throw a desk out with log books, the ones we have logging in any cargo that goes in or out. Then they started to throw out parcels, boxes, cartons, containers, whatever was in the outer room. I had the impression that this was just to make room.
>
> Q: What did they do after they cleared the outer room?

A: They took me inside the outer room; I closed the outer-room door, and then they told me to open up the inner room door, which they knew precisely. I proceeded to open up the inner room door and one guy asked me to point out where the alarm button was, because they knew there is also an alarm button inside the outer room. Now, after I open up the inner room door, they pushed me to the floor and one guy said, “Keep him away from any wall,” just to make sure there is still not another alarm button which I didn’t tell them about. They had me to the floor, one guy pointing the gun to my head. I was crushed on the floor. One guy went inside and started to throw out the parcels.

The thieves had made it, at last, into the inner sanctum. Now Jimmy the Gent had to make an instant revision in the Plan that had been on the drawing boards for months. Because Two-Gun Tommy had neglected to provide the second van, he knew his crew would have to leave half of the booty behind, for there simply wasn’t space anymore to cart it all away. The outer room contained money and jewelry—so much of it that after you turned it over to a launderer and a fence, you’d still probably come away with a clean $2 million, even if he only gave you forty cents on the dollar. But the inner room contained more money and jewelry. Much more. It was deeper into the blockhouse and harder to get to, and so that was where German management decreed that the really big money should be stored. With keys, combinations, death threats, and the benefit of Eirich’s know-how, they had reached it. It was all at their feet. This was what they would take. Eirich never saw what happened next, for he was lying facedown on the floor. But Jimmy the Gent produced the bills of lading and took a quick

inventory. There was more money in fewer boxes in the inner room; the outer room had a lot of money too, but there was less of it, and it was stored in more boxes. There just wasn't room to snatch it all. So the silver jewelry and the fifty-dollar bills of the outer room were heaved out of the way like so much offal, and the bandits concentrated instead on the gold jewelry and the hundred-dollar bills of the inner room.

Q: What happened after they discarded the goods from the outer room and started tossing out the goods from the inner room?

A: This one guy kept throwing them out until there was a pile, I would say that high [indicating three or four feet] off the floor. Approximately maybe I would say thirty or forty parcels or more. Then one parcel came out which fell just practically in front of me where I was crushed there. The fellow who was in the outer room, he put his foot right through this parcel. He stomped it open. It was very light cardboard. He put his hand in and among the packing material he came out with a handful of U.S. currency, and he said something to the effect, "Here's the cash."

Q: What happened then?

A: Well, he kept—the fellow in the inner office—he kept throwing out more parcels. I remember the one in the outer office saying, "Then throw out the ones with the seals on them!" You know, apparently thinking these are the most highly valued, most high-value cargo.

Q: But then they took other boxes too, is that correct?

A: They took everything they could get their hands on, as long as it was in the inner room—cartons, boxes, any kind of shape, with seals, without seals—without discrimination.

Q: Without discrimination?

A: Without discrimination.

Q: They just picked boxes and threw them out of the vault? Or did they open them first?

A: They opened only one box. That would be the one with the cash in it. It made them very happy.

Q: Right. They kicked that in, is that correct?

A: This one guy, he put his foot right through it. It was right at my head so I could recognize the green stuff what came out and I could also recognize the name of the shipper. It made them very happy. I think they must have tossed it in the air because some of it landed right at my head. Then they did a little dance around it.

Now the inner room was cleaned out. All of its contents had been shifted to the outer room, as the goods from the outer room, in their turn, had already been shifted out of the Val Room altogether and into the warehouse proper. Eirich closed the inner-room door so he could open the outer-room door, and after twenty minutes of sweat-producing labor inside the stuffy blockhouse, the bandits burst out again into the cavernous warehouse. It was 3:55 A.M.

John Angelo Sepe was sent forth to touch base with the other thieves, to make sure the Vamp was having no trouble with his prisoners (he wasn’t), to make sure Two-Gun Tommy had encountered no late arrivals at the front door (he hadn’t), and to make sure Gas Station Joey had done no violence

to anyone passing anywhere near the back door (undoubtedly to his disappointment, he hadn’t).

Meanwhile, Jimmy the Gent and Mr. Y went to work on the swag. Poor Eirich, who had already been forced to betray the security secrets that were so sacred to him as they were to his company, was now ordered to help load the pillage into the van and thus expedite the getaway as well. The Ford Econoline was parked only three or four feet from the Val Room, rear end toward the door, so the men could throw the packages from the outer room, the ones that had originally been in the inner room, directly into the van. When the van was filled to the roof, the thieves paused. There was an awful lot that didn’t fit. So they rearranged it, trying to load it more scientifically this time, packing the goods tighter. But there was still an awful lot that didn’t fit. So they rearranged it again. And again. Sepe rejoined them, and then Gas Station Joey and then Two-Gun Tommy came in, and they rearranged it again and again and again. But it still didn’t fit. Nothing would work. There just wasn’t enough space.

Jimmy the Gent looked again at the paperwork he carried in his hands. Then he looked sadly at the boxes on the floor: boxes from the outer room worth hundreds of thousands, boxes from the inner room worth millions, boxes from both places of unknown valuation, scores of boxes, treasure chests in miniature.

There were the guilders from the Netherlands, kroner from Norway, rupees from Pakistan, balboas from Panama. There were pearls from Australia, greenstone from New Zealand, diamonds from Sierra Leone, rubies from Czechoslovakia. There were negotiable bonds from Germany, Federal Reserve notes from Washington, securities from Hong Kong. There was all the money in the world at their feet, on the concrete floor of the

Lufthansa warehouse, and there it would stay. They could only look at it longingly.

The thieves didn't have the time to mope around grieving for very long. There would be time enough later on to feel sorry for themselves. Heartbroken or not, they still had work to do. "Close those outer doors," Jimmy the Gent commanded Eirich. "Make everything look normal. Get those packages out of the way." Then, to his boys, "Let's get out of here." It was 4:07 A.M.

First Eirich had to be returned to the cafeteria and cuffed with the other prisoners. As they walked Eirich up the stairs to the third floor, Two-Gun Tommy, still half drunk and blistering under the fire he had to take for messing up on that second van, made yet another blunder: he doffed his ski mask, apparently because he felt uncomfortable or was perspiring in it. It was only off for a few seconds, until someone yelled at him to put it back on, but that was enough—the damage had been done. Eirich caught a glimpse of the pug nose, the unruly hair, the scar on the cheek, and in forty-eight hours the FBI would put out a composite sketch of a man who was a dead ringer for DeSimone. That sketch would spur the pursuit and ultimately lead cops to identify the sextet that staged the crime—not that it ever did them any good. But it put the heat on the Robert's Lounge Gang, and it hamstrung some of their other scams. DeSimone was already a dead man—his "oversight" with the van had cost the mob some $10 million. But even if he hadn't blown that one, the ski mask slip-up alone would probably be enough to insure his death.

On the way to the cafeteria, the thieves toyed briefly with the idea of breaking up the boxes to make more room, the idea being that since ninety percent of a cash shipment that contains $100,000 or more is taken up by newspapers, canvas, burlap, styrofoam, and other packing materials, if they

threw those out, they wouldn't be wasting precious space with garbage. They could carry diamonds and gold and greenbacks instead of newspapers and burlap and styrofoam. But they were running out of time, so they abandoned that idea. There was also the possibility of stealing an employee's car to crate off the stuff, but that was rejected for the same reason.

In the cafeteria, Rudy Eirich, his usefulness now exhausted, was made to lie down with the others, handcuffed to Kerry Whalen on the left and John Murray on the right.

A man named Klaus Zepplin was made to give up his car keys. Then Jimmy the Gent addressed his handcuffed victims. "We're just about finished with you now, ladies and gentlemen," he began. "Klaus here will probably get his car back in a few days, and we hope the rest of you haven't been too inconvenienced, either. We're going to take off now, but we're going to leave one man behind, and he'll be right outside this room watching you, so nobody make a move or call the police for ten minutes. Then he'll leave you alone and join us in Klaus' car, and only then will you be free to do anything you want to do.

"Thank you for your cooperation, ladies and gentlemen, and have a very merry Christmas!"

On that note, the six gunmen fled. It was 4:16 A.M.

It had been a ruse, of course, that last step, and a very clever one. Klaus Zepplin's car was never stolen. The robbers never intended to steal it. The keys were dumped near the bridge over the Belt Parkway. No one was left behind. But the bandits had raised the specter of a masked gunman with a sawed-off shotgun standing vigil over the workers, and no one wanted to

take any chances. They waited the ten minutes Jimmy the Gent had asked for, and then they waited three or four minutes more, and still no one moved.

In that crucial fourteen minutes, the thieves made good their escape.

Finally, someone managed to wriggle free. Police were alerted, and the hunt was on. It was 4:30 A.M.

Five months later, in the United States Eastern District Courthouse in Brooklyn, Rudy Eirich wrapped up his testimony:

> Q: What happened after the thieves left?
>
> A: Well, we waited and waited, ten minutes and more then ten minutes, thinking all this time there was maybe a man with a gun watching over us; we couldn't know for sure. Then I lifted up my head and see that everybody is all right, and that all of the other ones have left. At that point, Kerry lifted his head too, and I saw the blood and he was more or less in bad shape. So I freed myself from John Murray. Him and I got up, and I took the guard with me, since he was handcuffed to me. I told John Murray to call the Port Authority Police and I took John Murray with me into the landing to find out if there was anybody left in the warehouse from the robbers. They were all gone and they were probably very far away at that point. There was nothing we could do—nothing. Then the police arrived within minutes.
>
> Q: Thank you. I have no further questions.
>
> A: It had been a long sixty minutes.
>
> Q: Thank you.
>
> A: A very long, long sixty minutes.

Q: Thank you.

All the pent-up tensions of that long, long, sixty minutes burst into the open as the Ford Econoline van screeched out of the airport. The Lufthansa Six couldn't relax for a minute, but they could forget themselves in a release of hollering and hooting and catcalls and a wide range of strange, guttural sounds.

For a moment, it didn't matter that the concept of a clean "twenty million dollars and zero zero cents" was in shambles. For a moment, it really didn't make any difference that the $20 million dream had already begun to sour. For a moment, no one gave a thought to what Flatlands Tony's macabre appearance in Robert's Lounge not so long ago might portend. All that mattered was the booty crammed into the back of the van.

It was an impressive inventory: more than $6 million in cash, weighing over 160 pounds, from the Commerzbank shipment that had been intended for Chase Manhattan; another one million dollars in cash, weighing just under thirty pounds, from an American overseas bank branch shipment to its home office in New York; some $900,000 in foreign currency, including Swiss francs, German marks, Italian lire, and Spanish pesetas; canceled traveller's checks from Bolivia valued at $10,000; unspecified bank documents without valuation attached; watches from Switzerland; gold coins from South Africa; some $800,000 in precious stones, gold chain, and silver pendants from Thailand; another million dollars in pearls, jade, emeralds, and other jewelry.

There was $10 million sitting in seventy-two crates in the back of that van. For an hour's labors, the six men had lifted more than had ever been

stolen in a single pounce anywhere in the world. Their little night's work had earned them about $166,666 a minute.

But there were another seventy-four crates worth another $10 million, and those were the ones that were still sitting on the floor of the warehouse of Building 261. That missing money, and the avengers who had already made plans for it, would hound into the grave three of the six people who sat scrunched in that van.

Still, there was beauty in the moments after the robbery, and at least for that morning, they were all millionaires. "Not as clean as I would have liked," said Jimmy the Gent, "but clean enough," and he pulled a bottle of champagne out from under the front seat to celebrate.

It was a nice touch, that bottle of champagne. With all the other things Burke had to worry about, it seemed an extraordinary gesture, carrying the bubbly to the very threshold of the Val Room, a gesture akin to that of the American mountaineers who carried the Frisbee up to the summit of Everest, just so they could toss it from 29,000 feet and watch as it glided into China.

For Jimmy the Gent, it must have been an equally poetic moment, and it seemed a fine way to cap a very productive night inside the Red Baron's sanctum.

As the getaway van lurched off into the wilds of southern Queens and the first hint of sunlight played over Kennedy Airport, the bandits popped that champagne bottled over the Belt Parkway and chugged it.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

After

It was about fifteen minutes after that champagne cork landed near North Conduit Avenue that the voice came over the police radio, a rackling monotone out of the 113th Precinct that somehow gave the impression it had heard it all before: “Sending a squad car over to JFK Building 261,” the voice said. “Someone handcuffed all the workers and stole a lot of money.”

The pursuit had begun. The chase was on. But the crooks were way ahead.

The full story of the breathtaking hijinks that were the aftermath of the crime has never appeared in print before. This account was pieced together from a series of interviews with organized crime sources, including one man who was privy to a minor portion of the operation. Intelligence sources within the NYPD, working from underworld informants of their own, have been able to confirm the general outline of this extraordinary tale.

The robbers’ first stop was apartment 2B at 109-16 120th Street in Ozone Park, where they’d scheduled a session of box-bashing, crate-crushing, and parcel-pounding. This was Stacks’ new apartment. He had rented it five days ago; he would die in it seven days from now. It was just fifteen blocks and three minutes away from the Lufthansa cargo terminal.

It was 4:20 A.M. when the six celebrants arrived at Stacks' new and sparsely furnished digs. Stacks wasn't there at the time; he was waiting at another prearranged location to take the van off to the compactor, and they wouldn't be seeing him for another ninety minutes. But his apartment was there and he had given them the keys to it and that was all that mattered. In a few minutes, the seventy-two stolen shipments were scattered on the living room floor and the men tore into them greedily, splitting them open with eight-inch baling hooks. The cash and gems were placed on one side of the room in a pile nearest the door; the garbage—the cardboard boxes, the metal strong boxes, and the packing material—were placed on the other side of the room in a pile nearest the incinerator. Once the loot was separated from its cumbersome containers, it was placed in canvas mail bags that were more manageable.

The entire operation took twelve minutes. When it was over, most of the incriminating evidence had been stripped away. The airway bills with the distinctive Lufthansa stamp were on the floor. So were the cartons with the Customs approval emblazoned across it, the address boards that indicated the cargo's intended destination before the crooks had given it an unexpected new destination, and the little stamp in the corner indicating the shipper or the freight forwarder. All of that was left in a heap in Stacks' apartment. It could be thrown out, burned, buried, or deep-sixed at a later date, and, in fact, it was. That was one of the few jobs that Stacks completed successfully before the end came.

The important thing was to get it out of the way now and put it in a place where no one would ever find it or stumble over it. It could then be gotten rid of for good at a more leisurely pace, at another time. The thieves locked up Stacks' apartment again, and moved on.

It was all over in twelve minutes. The entire purpose of renting that apartment had been for those meager twelve minutes of work. It was another of the many variations Jimmy the Gent had worked into the original Gruenewald-Werner Plan.

There is an old line that thieves use when they want to take over an apartment for use as a safe house immediately after a job—when they want to hide out, divide the money, drop off the loot, or any one of the thousand things that have to be done immediately after a big heist to insure a safe getaway: “I need your apartment for an all-night card game,” the line goes. It’s a line that’s usually spoken to a friend who can be trusted, to a wise guy who’s probably not mobbed-up but who still knows better than to ask any questions, who would accept the old all-night-card-game ploy at face value and take the couple of hundred dollars in cash he’d been offered. It’s a line that simply would not do after a job as big as Lufthansa.

So Burke had rented an apartment right in the neighborhood of Kennedy, and he’d rented it just for the job, just for those twelve minutes, just to crack open those seventy-two boxes. And as if that weren’t enough for him, he’d even produced a man—Stacks—to live in it, and to die in it, and thus make it seem more legitimate. And all for a lousy twelve minutes.

At 4:32 A.M., when the crooks piled back into the getaway van, the scene looked a little more normal. Instead of six men cramped in an overloaded vehicle, sitting on each other’s laps, or buried under the boxes, there was now a little more room for them to breathe and move around. The goods no longer seemed ready to burst through the sides. A passing cop would be less likely to have his suspicions aroused.

The next stop was a Queens motel. A room had already been rented here; that was Frenchie McMahon’s doing. He met the thieves in the lobby and wordlessly passed them a key. It was 4:55 A.M. Inside the room,

Frenchie had placed six changes of clothing, three attache cases, and two empty suitcases. The six men who entered that room in the dark, featureless clothing that was the hallmark of their trade would emerge from it in lighter, more casual wear. They left their robbers' duds behind, along with their ski masks and gloves. Later, Frenchie would place them in the suitcases and burn them.

In another gesture of arrogance and contempt, and also to save time, the thieves left most of their $10 million windfall in the same Ford Econoline van they had used to steal it, in the parking lot of the motel, where anybody driving past could see it. It was risky, but it was a calculated risk. They would only be in the motel for half an hour, and if they carted the money up to their room and then brought it back down again, it would probably delay them another ten or fifteen minutes, to say nothing of the risk of being seen by a doorman or desk clerk. Six men in dark clothes, hauling up several heavy mail satchels to their room only to bring them down again a little while later, at almost exactly the same time the radio stations would be breaking into their regular programming with the first flashes about the super-heist at Lufthansa, was certain to ring a bell with even the most obtuse motel employee.

But they did bring some money up to their motel room, for it was time to pay off the help.

The safest money in the batch they'd swiped was the $6 million shipment that Germany's Commerzbank had attempted to send to Chase. These were the old bills that were supposed to become fuel for the fires of the Federal Reserve Bank. Since the money was going to be destroyed, there was no record anywhere of its serial numbers. It was safe, clean. This, then, was the money that would be paid to the help, the so-called "contract workers."

Their share was a smart $200,000—$100,000 now, and the balance within two weeks. Jimmy the Gent and Mr. Y counted out the money and started passing around piles of fifty- and one-hundred-dollar notes to John Angelo Sepe, Gas Station Joey, the Vamp, and Two-Gun Tommy. These four men were mere hired hands; they had done their job and they'd be well rewarded for their little night's work. They would be paid off, to the tune of $200,000, and dismissed. The bulk of the money would go elsewhere, of course. But for these four, the worries were over, or should have been. They had good money and they wouldn't have to be bothered by the fencing. They were home. It was over. They were dismissed. At least that's how it worked in theory. But this job was different. No one would ever be dismissed from it; three of those four contract workers would be homicide statistics very soon, and the fourth would be a jailbird. For they were expendable. It was the one thing no one had bothered to tell them about now that the job was over—that they were headed for planned obsolescence.

(Farming out contract work is a common mob practice on big jobs. Instead of taking home a percentage of the take, your average thief is paid an agreed-on amount of cash up front, a very small fraction of the total profits. It seems, at first glance, a raw deal for the man who does most of the work and takes most of the risks, but most thieves prefer such an arrangement. It ties them into a larger organization, which is vital. Only an idiot would try to deal jewelry and securities and canceled traveler's checks from Bolivia by himself—what if he sold to the wrong person? For a haul of any size, he's got to have an excellent fence. And that is where the mob has him. He's paid in five minutes, and he's paid in clean, untraceable, large-denomination bills, and his worries are over. It's generally considered a smart move among thieves. A lot of them do it free-lance, but when

they’re connected to a big shot, they don’t have to, and they’re crazy if they do. It’s a form of protection. If they ever need a favor, or if there’s ever a big score again, they’ll probably get it.)

After the loot was divvied up, the gang split up. Sepe, the Vamp, and Gas Station Joey walked out of that Queens motel room looking for all the world like respectable businessmen, each with an attache case under his arm, who were just coming out of an all-night negotiating session. Never mind what was in those attache cases.

It was the last time the six men would ever be together in one room. Soon, they’d be heading off in six separate directions, and before long, they’d be arguing about the loot, killing each other off, disappearing altogether, or walking into the waiting arms of the FBI.

Frenchie was waiting downstairs in the lobby, and he drove the threesome off in another stolen car he’d picked up for the occasion. The Vamp went to a hideaway in Brooklyn; Gas Station Joey went on a binge in Queens; John Angelo Sepe went back to his Long Island home and was almost stopped by a traffic cop for speeding.

Meanwhile, a few minutes after they left, Jimmy the Gent, Two-Gun Tommy, and Mr. Y came out of the room. It was 5:30 A.M.

Jimmy the Gent flicked on the radio as they bounded into the Ford Econoline just in time to hear that a tri-state alarm had been put out for the van he was at that moment driving. “More than 250 law enforcement officers from seven city, state, and federal agencies are looking for it,” the newscaster said. “They’re watching the tunnels and the bridges. They’re broadcasting the alarm over all the police and fire frequencies in the city every five minutes, describing the getaway vehicle, a black 1978 Ford Econoline van of the 150 series, license plates 508-HWM…”

Jimmy the Gent switched off the radio. So Eirich had managed to get the plates, after all. “That bastard is one of those above-and-beyond types,” he complained. “He didn’t have to do his job that well, did he?”

The bandits’ next stop was a Brooklyn garage, according to a copy of a classified intelligence report obtained from the NYPD’s Organized Crime Control Bureau, and the twenty minutes it took to get there from the motel in Queens must have been the toughest of all. In their anxiety, it must have seemed as if they were passing every cop who ever wore a badge in the city of New York, that motorists were looking at them, that pedestrians were pointing them out as they passed on the streets, that the lights were all turning red just as they got there, and staying red for inordinately long periods of time.

But they made it to the garage Tony Ducks owned in Brooklyn, the last prearranged rendezvous point on the night’s itinerary.

The doors were open as the van steamed in, and from somewhere inside, someone activated a button and the doors rolled shut and latched behind them. They were secure now. They had made it. It was 5:50 A.M.

And in an instant, Stacks and Little Marty Krugman and Richard Eaton and Anthony Rodriguez were rushing out of nowhere to surround the van, and Mr. Y and Two-Gun Tommy were jumping out, and even Fat Frankie the Driver showed up, though he didn’t say anything, and they all gathered around Jimmy the Gent Burke and raised him on their shoulders and cheered and cheered and cheered, as the winning team in a World Series cheers and parades the pitcher around the mound when it’s all over.

“The radio says only five million,” said Little Marty.

“We got a good ten million,” said Jimmy the Gent.

“The radio says “letter perfect, an inside job, the most daring crime in the city’s history,” said Little Marty. “All that crap. It was perfect, eh?”

“It was perfect enough,” said Jimmy the Gent.

“I guess the Committee of One probably knew what he was doing all along,” said Richard Eaton.

Jimmy the Gent just shrugged. “Did you ever have any doubts?”

Mr. Y had been aggravated throughout the duration of the robbery because Burke had made him do without his precious H. Upmanns. He lit up now, and in a gesture that was rare for him, he opened his jacket pockets and pulled out a fistful of H. Upmanns and started passing them around. Then everybody else lit up too, even Stacks, who generally felt more comfortable with White Owls.

But everyone in that musty old garage still had work to do, and soon it was time to get back to business again. “Enough frivolity,” Burke declared somberly.

“Yes,” Richard Eaton assented. And then that lone intellectual voice sounded again in that unappreciative crowd of street hoods and dreamers and gamblers and cutthroats: “We’ve all got promises to keep,” he began. The gang looked at him blankly, but that never stopped Richard Eaton. “And miles to go before we sleep. And miles to go before we sleep.”

It was 6:00 A.M. when Burke decreed an end to the frivolity in that garage in Brooklyn. The loot was transferred into three separate cars, each of which had a different destination. Eaton took a bundle of cash and gems in his vehicle, and within minutes set off for the Hollywood, Florida home of mob string-puller Paul Vario, Sr. Rodriguez took a huge pile also, and he was soon gone to deliver the goods to an intermediary for Tony Ducks at an undisclosed Long Island location. The rest of the haul was placed in Fat Frankie the Driver’s shiny black Cadillac limousine. Then Stacks drove off

in the Ford Econoline van he had been charged with destroying in the compactors of New Jersey, carrying the license plate he was to swap for the one the cops knew the number of, and the five hundred dollars that was to pay for the whole thing. He went off instead to his fateful rendevous with the Kahlua and cream of the after-hour joint in Brownsville. Little Marty, who had come to take the second van to another compactor somewhere in New England, went home, since there was no second van for him to crush.

Then Two-Gun Tommy and Burke and Mr. Y sped off with Fat Frankie and the money. The gang had mostly gone off on their own separate routes now, and it was time to drop off Mr. Y and send him on his. Mr. Y, for reasons that are vague, insisted on taking the subway. Even the Robert's Lounge stoolie who supplied the author with that hearsay account seemed genuinely puzzled at this. Garbage and utility and service trains rumbled through the station, as they do at that hour, but soon Mr. Y was headed for midtown. He went to the Port Authority Bus Terminal on Eighth Avenue and caught the first Greyhound to Florida. He was to join his boss, Paul Vario, Sr., and he was also to join the money. It's said that he got more than his share. Today, Mr. Y is a very wealthy man, whereabouts unknown. But it's said he passes out H. Upmanns to everyone he meets.

It was 6:10 A.M. when Mr. Y shook hands all around and left the limo at an IND station in Brooklyn. In less than two hours, Burke and DeSimone were due back at the Community Treatment Center in midtown Manhattan. But they had a stop to make somewhere in Queens first. It was going to be a close one.

There was still the matter of a few million dollars' worth of merchandise that had to be disposed of. That had come to pose a serious problem. Remarkably, neither Tony Ducks nor Paul Vario, Sr. wanted all of it at this stage, since the expected heat the robbery would generate would

make it virtually impossible to move it through the usual channels. Vario wanted a third of the booty sent down by courier, and Eaton was already on his way to Florida. Tony Ducks wanted a third delivered to his mansion in Whitestone, and Rodriguez was probably already there by now, handing the valuables to the Godfather's emissaries outside his walled retreat. But that left another third, some $3.3 million, and by default Jimmy the Gent was left as its custodian. Not that he objected terribly much; it would enable him to turn a profit even more handsome than he had originally imagined.

But it did present an immediate problem. Somehow, the plans for disposing of this last windfall had gotten lost in the shuffle. Or more accurately, Burke had never gotten around to making them. Overwhelmed by his preparations for the robbery, he had neglected to find the means to squirrel away its fruits. Wrapped up in every logistical log jam from apartment-hunting to the recruitment of thieves, from the accumulation of airway bills to the supply of rosary beads and champagne, Burke had simply neglected to find a place to stow the dough.

How was he to find a safe place to hide more money than the Brink's job netted in Boston, to find it on moment's notice, and to conceal it there and still have time to get back to the CTC halfway house before his keepers took a head count in less than two hours?

There was one thing it was obvious that he couldn't do: he couldn't take the money back to jail with him. Walking into the Otel Bryant with several million dollars stored in several bulging mail satchels was too brazen an act even for Burke. So he had to find a safe drop and he had to find it quick.

There were several possibilities. He could leave it behind the bar at Robert's Lounge, but that was a good way to insure never seeing it again, or at least never seeing it in one piece again. He could bury it in Forest Park or in a remote corner of one of the cemeteries in Glendale, but that was too

risky, as well. He could store it in the safe of a scrapyard in which Paul Vario, Sr. held the controlling interest, in the shadow of the Kosciuszko Bridge, but there was no way of knowing how many people had the combination, so that was also no good.

In the end, Jimmy the Gent fixed on a simple solution: he took the money home.

Only Burke would be arrogant enough to attempt such a scheme. Only Burke would be cocky enough to assume his invulnerability to the law extended this far. After twenty minutes of driving in circles and desperately groping for a way out, Burke had found it with his usual flair for making the preposterous work.

It was 6:45 A.M. when Fat Frankie the Driver pulled up in front of the two-story, single-family home at 78-02 160th Avenue in the Howard Beach section of Queens. The house looked out over the marshlands of Spring Creek Park in an affluent, all-white, mostly Italian and Irish neighborhood made up of some 250 private dwellings complete with front and back lawns. The house was just a mile or two along South Conduit Avenue from the cargo terminals of Kennedy Airport. Jimmy the Gent had always said he liked to be close to his work.

Now, working feverishly, Burke and Two-Gun Tommy rushed the money into the house. That took five minutes. They probed for a suitable hiding place and then pulled up the floorboards. That took another five minutes. They buried the treasure beneath the wooden planking in one of the bedrooms and then closed those floorboards up again. That took five more minutes. Finally, they spread a rug over the evidence and moved a heavy bureau and another piece of furniture on top of it. Jimmy the Gent’s family was not involved in any way in the hiding of the money. His wife was in another room of the house, sound asleep, oblivious to everything,

when her husband unlocked the front door, walked in with $3.3 million, and buried it. The description of this outrageous stunt was supplied by a mob source who can only be identified as “a friend of the family.”

It was almost 7:10 A.M. when the two men dashed back into the car and started off again. “Back to jail,” said Jimmy the Gent. “And step on it.”

At precisely the same time, in another part of town sixteen miles away, a guard, Mickey, was arriving for work at the Community Treatment Center. He was about ten minutes late, but then he was about ten minutes late every morning, and because his was a federal job, no one really cared. Mickey the guard checked in and stationed himself at the guard booth where he spent the first hour of every day. As usual, it was another slow day in the halfway house. As usual, he went to a vending machine in the hallway and fixed himself his early-morning cup of coffee.

There’d probably be nothing to do until 8:00 A.M., when, as usual, he’d have to make the rounds, knock on the doors, count the heads, and make sure that everybody was where they were supposed to be. They usually were. These inmates had just been sprung from jail and were on their way back to the streets again; most of them didn’t want to do anything to jeopardize their chances of getting out on time.

Sometimes one of them would overstay on his visiting privileges. Then the privileges would be suspended. Sometimes one of them would get a leave for the work-release program and wind up nodding off on a streetcorner somewhere. He could go back to jail for that. Sometimes one of them would go around the corner and find a woman in Times Square. If he came back late, he would be penalized for that, too. And occasionally, just occasionally, one of them would commit a serious crime in the time he was

away from the CTC. That was why the guards made these routine checks from time to time: to establish who was where, and when. The problem was that the checks weren't made at random. Instead, the guards came around at set times on set schedules, which made them easy to elude.

Burke and DeSimone had been accounted for at midnight; they knew, once they slipped out, that they would be okay for eight hours; but they knew too that they had to be back by 8:00 A.M. for the next room check, in order to establish their alibi. If they made it, they'd have proof they were in the Otel Bryant, at Broadway and 54th Street in Manhattan, between the hours of midnight and 8:00 A.M., far away from the Val Room at Building 261 in Queens when the crime came down. The sign-in/sign-out forms would bear them out. But if they didn't make it, their absence would be noted on their prisoner records. Those records would doubtless be pulled within twenty-four hours by the FBI's airport squad, which makes a practice of checking on the activities and whereabouts of some fifty to seventy known airport felons immediately after any major crime at Kennedy or one of the other strips. Those records would be sure to raise the hackles of already suspicious G-men, and before long they'd have their first two suspects.

Jimmy the Gent and Two-Gun Tommy were in a race, driven by their desperate need for an alibi and their fears of blowing the whole caper. They were in a race with a guard who didn't even know he was in a race, who would go lazily about his rounds only because his job required him to do so.

Mickey the guard looked at his watch. It was 7:30 A.M. He sipped his coffee and leafed through a ten-year-old copy of Playboy he had been given by one of the inmates. He glanced up disinterestedly when one of the men signed out for his dishwashing job over on Restaurant Row. He smiled

vaguely when another one told him a dirty joke he had heard in the lockup in Altoona. He did everything at his usual unhurried pace.

Jimmy the Gent looked at his watch. It was 7:30 A.M. “Can’t you get any more speed out of this thing?” he barked at Fat Frankie the Driver.

“All the speed in the world is not going to get us through this traffic,” Fat Frankie returned.

He was right. The rush hour had begun. And as every New Yorker knows, that experience can be one of the greatest psychic traumas the world has to offer.

The crooks were to wend their way back to the CTC by a tortuous circuit through the backstreets of Queens, past the factories, warehouses, grade crossings, and railroad yards along Newtown Creek, and through the Midtown Tunnel. In doing so, they caught some of the worst traffic in the city. There was the Long Island Railroad commuter train that crossed right in front of them near Borden Avenue, at one of the very few grade crossings still left in New York. They didn’t race it to the crossing as in the old grade-B movies, but they shot across those tracks before the gates came up again, as the train began its slow descent to the tunnel that would take it under the river and on to Penn Station. Then there was the bumper-to-bumper grind of the Long Island Expressway, famous only as “the world’s longest parking lot” to frustrated motorists. After that, there were the slow-moving lines leading to the toll booths of the Queens-Midtown Tunnel, which were manned by slow-moving and surly toll-takers. Finally, and perhaps worst of all, there was the welter of Manhattan crosstown traffic.

Mickey the guard looked at his watch. It was 7:50 A.M. He stirred up the dregs in his cup of coffee. He yawned. He looked at the last nude picture in his magazine. He yawned again. Then he pulled from his back pocket a

paperback novel by Louis L'Amour and put it down on the table in front of him. But he didn't open it.

Jimmy the Gent looked at his watch. It was 7:50 A.M. Now Fat Frankie the Driver was honking furiously, weaving in and out of cars, paying little heed to red lights, and paying little heed to pedestrians, either, in the frantic scramble to get back to jail on time. "Attaboy, Frankie," whooped Two-Gun Tommy DeSimone as the driver almost ran down a nun.

Mickey the guard looked at his watch. It was 7:55 A.M. He looked for the page where he'd dog-eared his book. He read about a man on an untamed grulla who rode into town for the last time. He read about another man who had the winds of the West in his walk. He read about a dry-gulching in a desert arroyo, and about a killer who was as deadly as a rattlesnake, and even more silent. He yawned.

Jimmy the Gent looked at his watch. It was 7:55 A.M. The limo shot through Murray Hill like a bullet. Fat Frankie went up Madison and hung a hard left when he hit 42nd Street. An alky stumbled out of Bryant Park, and Fat Frankie sobered him up in a hurry by almost running over his right foot. Then up Sixth Avenue, where a conventioneer on a stroll from the New York Hilton was almost nicked as the limo whizzed past him.

Mickey the guard looked at his watch. It was 8:00 A.M. He put down Louis L'Amour just as the veteran gunfighter tossed his two Colt six-shooters into the dust and, with his fists instead, taught the bad guy a lesson he'd never forget. He stretched and yawned and stood up. He walked down the hall to begin his rounds. Then he decided he wanted a Dr. Pepper, and headed for the soda machine at the other side of the floor.

Jimmy the Gent looked at his watch. It was 8:00 A.M. He smashed his fist against the seat in front of him as a New Jersey driver in the car ahead stopped at a yellow light. He raged and cursed and he kept raging and

cursing until the light changed and they rocketed off again. On 55th Street they swung left, past City Center, the Wellington Hotel, the New York Sheraton, the Mutual of New York building, then left again at Broadway. Fat Frankie screeched to a halt in front of a halfway house that also doubled as a hotel. The sign read “OTEL BRYANT.”

Mickey the guard looked at his watch. It was 8:05 A.M. He pressed the coin-return again and he pressed the Dr. Pepper button again, but his money didn’t come back and his soda didn’t come out. He kicked the machine. But still no forty cents, and no Dr. Pepper. He shrugged and gave up and went on his rounds.

Jimmy the Gent looked at his watch. It was 8:05 A.M. The usual derelicts were clustered together in the lobby of the Bryant. The wire-cage elevator was waiting. Two-Gun Tommy pressed the button for the seventh floor. “You’re a gambling man,” said Jimmy the Gent as the doors opened. “Flip a coin. Heads we make it, tails we don’t.”

It was 8:07 A.M. when Mickey the guard knocked on Room 724. The sleepy, bleary-eyed man who opened the door had a face that was flushed with whiskey, activity, and cold air, but Mickey the guard never noticed it. The man was dressed in a bathrobe and carried a toothbrush that already had toothpaste on it, and obviously had just gotten up.

“Morning,” said the man with the toothbrush in his hand.

“Morning,” said Mickey the guard. “Tommy D. in there too?”

“I’m in here, all right,” came the voice from inside the room. “Thought I’d sleep in a bit this morning.”

Then the guard and the man with the toothbrush in his hand jawed a bit about the football season and the Superbowl.

“By the way,” said Mickey the guard, “you’re an old airport man. Here’s one you’d like. Somebody stole millions and millions out of the

Lufthansa building out at Kennedy last night. Pretty fantastic job. Millions! Nobody is saying for sure how much it was yet. But it was millions. It's all over the radio. They made a clean getaway too. An inside job, if you ask me."

"Pretty fancy, was it?"

"It was pretty fancy, all right."

The man with the toothbrush in his hand beamed with pride.

It had all gone off like clockwork. At 3:15 A.M., December 11, 1978, the job began. By 4:15 A.M., it was over. By 5:15 A.M., they had sorted out the goods in Stacks' place and were transacting business in a motel. By 6:15 A.M., they had finished in the garage, dispatched couriers with the money, and taken Mr. Y to the subway. By 7:15 A.M., $3.3 million had been laid beneath the floorboards in Howard Beach. And by 8:15 A.M., the mastermind of it all was back in his cozy little jail, sitting pretty, preparing to go to breakfast and transactional analysis.

With the money stolen, divided, and stashed, and with the two gunmen recorded as accounted for, the job was at an end. But all the murders that would be needed to keep that money intact—that would be needed to keep those mob overlords who would profit by it out of the can—hadn't even begun.

They'd begin soon enough. The heist had worked, but the spoils would need safeguarding. The proliferation of corpses would quickly attest to that.

It was in those final moments, as the gunmen and the guard converged on that stark hotel room within seconds of each other, that the crime had been saved. That was the critical, make-it-or-break-it point of the heist.

It was one of the many twists that Lufthansa was famous for—that the engineers of the $10 million crime of the century were saved from detection because a guard in a halfway house wanted a Dr. Pepper, and his quarter jammed in a soda machine.

Later that same morning, Jimmy the Gent Burke and Two-Gun Tommy DeSimone could be found at the counter of the Cosmic Coffee Shop. They had signed themselves out, legitimately this time, without the benefit of Benjamin Franklin, as if they had never been away. They were a pair of instant millionaires, and they were sitting on the largest cash haul in world history, but they still accepted their five-dollar-a-day meal tickets from the guards at the CTC. And they still presented those food vouchers and sipped coffee and munched Danish among the down-and-outers of the Cosmic, just like any other inmate of the Otel Bryant.

The first few rules after a big score are simple rules. Don’t drive a sparkling new Thunderbird if you used to drive a battered old Plymouth. Don’t buy your wife a mink coat if you never bought her an ermine coat. Don’t buy ermine if you never bought sable. Don’t buy sable if you never bought opossum. And don’t eat out at Lutece or Le Cygne or La Grenouille if you ordinarily eat out at the Cosmic Coffee Shop.

So far, the bandits had kept those first few rules. The success of the getaway hinged on whether they would continue to do so.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Extra! Extra!

The Federal Bureau of Investigation doesn't always get its man. But when it does, it never lets him go.

It latches onto him like a bloodsucking, life-sapping parasite. It spends thousands of days and thousands of taxpayer dollars to make his life as uncomfortable as possible, to bug him and tail him and hound him and badger him without surcease. It sics the best, most polished skip-tracers in the country on him, special agents who devote the greater part of their working lives to recording his every movement. It investigates his gambling and his gambolling. It interrogates his grocer and his grade school teacher, his girlfriend and his gun moll, his godson and his grandmother. It intimidates his gink and his gunsel and his gonoph and his golliwog. And it never, never lets him go. Never!

For, as new recruits are taught in the bureau's criminology courses in Washington D.C.: "A criminal's file is never shut, and the case is never closed, even when all the principals are dead."

So it was for two small-time crooks from Bean Town who happened to be in New York on the early morning of December 11, 1978. They weren't exactly dead, this pair, but they were old men now, full of memories. One was in his late sixties, the other in his mid-seventies, and they were retired

from their chosen profession, or at any rate, they were semi-retired. Once, a long time ago, they had gotten away with something big, something very, very big. Or at least they almost got away with it.

On the evening of January 17, 1950, Adolph (Jazz) Maffie and Thomas (Sandy) Richardson, along with an eleven-man gang, hit Brink's of Boston for $2.5 million, of which more than $1.2 million was in the coldest of cash. They made the cleanest of getaways, never left Boston, sat on the money, and lived like kings for years as the FBI invested more than five times the amount they stole in an effort to solve the case and prove they stole it. The bureau wanted them badly. The statute of limitations was actually kicked back a year with a rushed-through change in federal law when it looked like time itself was going to get the thieves off the hook. "Not very sporting," the *Boston Globe* editorialized at the time.

They almost made it. But finally, and to the lasting sorrow of the North End, the weak link broke. A man known as Specs O'Keefe, who had been a suspect since Day One of the robbery, started talking too much and too loud, in all the wrong places, about his biggest job. This had to be dealt with. And so a New York hoodlum named Elmer (Trigger) Burke was imported to deal with it. (Trigger Burke was a distant relative of Jimmy the Gent Burke, and he would later die in the hot seat at Sing Sing after a spectacular jailbreak from the old lockup on West Street.) Trigger staked out O'Keefe for months, and then one dark night on a street near Scollay Square, he jumped out of a black sedan, leveled a Thompson submachine gun, and fired forty rounds into Specs O'Keefe at close range. O'Keefe went down with slugs in the chest, neck, abdomen, back, and all four limbs, but amazingly, he did not die. He lingered, comatose, for weeks as a tight guard was kept around the clock at his hospital bedside, with the mob

praying for his heart to stop and the FBI praying for his tongue to become unfrozen.

O'Keefe recovered, and when he did, he began to sing, and he sang in full voice. The race against time was on again, and the indictments were handed up and the arrests came down just five days before the newly extended statute of limitations would have run out. The gang was slapped behind bars with fourteen-year prison sentences, and stool pigeon Specs O'Keefe drifted off to sunny California, where he would die—alone—of natural causes a few years later. He was called "Paul Williams" on the death certificate.

And that should have been the end of that. It was over. The sleight-of-hand in the Brink's building took place in 1950. The arrests were finally made in 1956. Jazz Maffie and Sandy Richardson walked out of jail when the parole board sprung them in 1971. They were free men. It was over. Supposedly. But the knock on the door and the familiar, unreadable face of the G-man on the other side came in 1978, on the eleventh of December. For to the Federal Bureau of Investigation, it would never really be over. Neither Brink's then, nor Lufthansa now. The FBI had gotten its man back in 1956. Now, more than two decades later, in fabled fashion, it was still hounding him. It would never, ever let him go, not even in the grave.

The aging ex-robbers were sitting over highballs in their luxurious suite in the Regency Hotel, twenty floors above the bustle of Park Avenue, listening to radio accounts of the big robbery, when they heard the knock on the mahogany door shortly after noon on that memorable December 11. Maffie opened the door, took an expensive cigar from his mouth, and nodded vaguely to the agent who walked into the room. He had seen this government man before. In fact, he'd seen him off and on for the past seven years, ever since he came out of stir, and he'd seen him in the oddest places:

in the rearview mirror of his Olds when he drove to a favorite saloon; in the box seat next to his when he cheered the BoSox in Fenway Park; in the line at the two-dollar window when he stepped up to the hundred-dollar window in the clubhouse at Suffolk Downs; in the line at the supermarket check-out counter when he bought a box of Friskies for his cat. At least he *thought* he'd seen him before; they all looked alike to him. Certainly they all dressed alike and thought alike and talked alike.

Now the man stepped briskly into the receiving room of the suite, hitched up his pants, and got right to the point.

"Where were you at 3:15 A.M. on the morning of December 11, 1978?"

Jazz Maffie and Sandy Richardson looked at each other sideways and smiled. It was almost comforting for them to learn that people on the FBI payroll still spoke that way, that there were still earnest young agents around with great drive but little imagination, who still couched their queries in the cliches they had been taught in Criminology 101. It was a pleasure to hear that the language of Eliot Ness and "The Untouchables" was not yet dead. Maffie and Richardson looked at each other again and beamed. No one had asked them a question like that in over a generation. But they remembered full well a similar voice from a similar young man who had spoken from a different era and had asked them again and again and again, "Where were you at 7:10 P.M. on the evening of January 17, 1950?"

The FBI man was not amused. He looked at them from unsmiling, humorless eyes. With a nervous twitch of his hands, he straightened his tie. He folded his arms and hunched up his shoulders and mustered his dignity and then asked the same stock question all over again, as if he knew no other.

“This is no laughing matter,” he began, and for him it obviously wasn’t. “Where were you at 3:15 A.M. on the morning of December 11, 1978?”

“You mean nine hours ago?” said Maffie slowly. And he took a drag from his cigar. They sort of expected you to be a wise guy and to talk back. That was part of the game, and at this stage he knew it by rote.

“I’m the one who’s asking the questions,” said the FBI man impatiently. “Where were you…?”

“In bed,” said Richardson, before the agent could finish.

“Exhausted from our labors,” said Maffie.

“What labors?” said the FBI man.

“A German airline,” mused Richardson irrelevantly.

“Well, I hope it was Jewish thieves,” mused Maffie. He chuckled slightly. And he took another long drag from his cigar.

The FBI man sighed in disgust, and his parting glance took in the wily old thieves with obvious contempt. Then he turned on his heel and stormed out of the room. “You’ll hear from me again,” he said in parting, but they never did. (The dialogue and the description of that whole incident comes from an interview with the two elderly ex-crooks a few days afterwards.)

It was an enormously comical notion that these two old men, whose moments in the limelight had long ago passed, could have had anything at all to do with the matter of Building 261, let alone that they could actually have ventured into the Red Baron’s domain, bearing firearms and wearing ski masks. Yet these were the very first suspects the FBI came up with. “You must be kidding,” Maffie had said almost thirty years earlier, when the feds were badgering him for his role in the Brink’s job. But the Bureau never kids.

Jazz Maffie still had a reputation for being a good inside man, it was true, and his fingers had once been nimble enough to pick any lock that was

put in front of him. But now he had begun to suffer from arthritis; the hands had difficulty even closing, and his lock-picking days had been over for years. Sandy Richardson was once known as the best safecracker in the business, or at least the best in the Northeast, and it was said that the ever-so-faint “music of the tumblers” used to guide him in his calling. But now his hearing was going fast. He was already half-deaf, the tempo of the tumblers was just a memory, and his safe-cracking days belonged to history.

It seems inconceivable that the FBI could ever seriously have believed that this pair of criminal has-beens had done anything even remotely related to the Lufthansa caper. But with no leads or clues of any kind, with nowhere to go and no way to get there, there was little else to do but grasp at straws, and the Bureau had always been good at that. Because they drew a blank everywhere they turned in those first few hours after the robbery, they ended up turning to some mighty strange quarters.

There was another reason to go after these two losers at the game of Brinksmanship. There are only a few people in the country who are any good at the highly specialized trade of breaking into strong rooms. And it just so happened that two of them, professionals named Maffie and Richardson, were in a town that was foreign to them, 215 miles away from their usual stomping grounds, on the very day that a supposedly impenetrable Val Room in that same town had been bowled over like so many tenpins. It was inevitable that suspicions were aroused. There was an elementary question that needed to be asked, and the sourpuss FBI man had neglected to ask it. What were these two improper Bostonians doing in Gotham in the first place?

It was a big day for Hollywood and Universal Pictures, another chancy New York opening to live through. Millions of dollars were on the line. Reputations were about to be won or lost, fragile acting careers launched or sunk. The going would get a bit rocky, that much was known for sure, though little else was. A New York opening for any film is a tense moment in the industry, for the renegade New York audiences generally pay little attention to what the critics tell them to think, and sometimes they wind up thinking the complete opposite just out of contrariness. It's this alarming tendency of the first-night audiences to make up their own minds that has traditionally given them a make-it-or-break-it power over hundreds of movies. Besides, this particular venture was more speculative than most. A multimillion-dollar crime extravaganza, it went against the grain with its scant dosages of sex and violence, and was given a mere PG rating, an effective red light to the prurient. Universal did everything it could to counter this failing. The promotional campaign had been a big one. The most expensive billboard in the world had been rented. Perched on a rooftop high above Times Square, it was 110 feet long.

In addition, a couple of cigar-chomping broad hats from another age whose one big score the picture chronicled had been brought in to strut their stuff and provide authenticity. These preparations had been under way for months. Now, at last, the big moment had arrived. The marquees of the Gemini II Theater on Second Avenue and the Criterion on Broadway were ablaze. The lines were long. The theaters were packed. The house lights went down. The curtains parted. The credits rolled up. The music came on.

The film, of course, was *The Brink's Job*.

And as the story of their exploits unfolded in living color across the big silver screen before them, Adolph (Jazz) Maffie and Thomas (Sandy) Richardson could be seen inside that old Times Square playhouse,

stretching their feet lazily into the aisles, glancing up at each other from time to time, and smiling.

It was to promote this movie that the last two surviving members of the eleven-man gang that knocked over Brink's of Boston had come to New York in the first place. But on the very day the movie opened, the Lufthansa heist had come along to promote it far more effectively than the Universal hype machine could have. As it happened, this happy, innocent coincidence of timing would insure *The Brink's Job* a spectacularly successful run across the country, and a better audience turnout in New York than it would ever get in Boston.

December 11, 1978 was many things to many people. To the Robert's Lounge Gang, it was the most dramatic caper of their careers. To the swarms of lawmen who descended on Building 261 in their wake, it was the most dramatic case of their careers. To the press and hence the public, it was the crime of the century. And to the moguls of Hollywood, it was the opening of a major new film about a crime that for nearly three decades, and until that very day, had itself been considered the crime of the century. But even as the derring-do of the Brink's robbers was being celebrated in celluloid, a new super-crime, replete with derring-do of its own, had come along to top them.

And no one anywhere in the world could have been more happy about it than Jazz Maffie and Sandy Richardson.

The FBI never quite accepted the coincidence as fully innocent; the official mind can be remarkably narrow. That the commission of one crime could coincide so closely with the release of a movie about another, and that both could be of such record-book caliber, was something the Bureau would never quite grasp. The feds were too suspicious, too unimaginative, too willing to smell something fishy.

But Maffie and Richardson could grasp it, all right. And indeed, they had no choice. They had come down the pike from Boston merely to watch the story of their biggest crime. That they ended up as the first unwitting suspects in another crime, a bigger crime still, one committed almost thirty years later, was just another stray thread in the tangled web that Lufthansa was still weaving.

“Everybody’s got some larceny in ’em, everybody. It’s a deep streak in human nature, and it runs as deep in a man as the blood in his veins. Why do you suppose ordinary law-abiding citizens end up liking bank robbers so much? Tell me that. It’s because they’re not so law-abiding as you think, or they wish they weren’t. The bank robber’s done something that most stay-at-homes only read about from their armchairs, or watch on their television sets. But go watch some guy on the street when he makes a call from a pay phone. He puts in his dime and he makes his call and when it’s over, what do you suppose he does? He puts his finger in the change slot. You think if the dime comes back he’s gonna mail it to the phone company? Of course he’s not; he’s no sap. Everybody likes stealing. Look at all the great books. In prison, that was all I ever did. I read books. I even wrote a couple of novels, and I reorganized the prison library, put the whole thing on the Dewey Decimal System. And what is in all the great books? A crime! Maybe that’s what makes ’em great. Somewhere, in back of all the great books, there is always a crime!”

Not exactly the type of language you’d find in a sociologist’s treatise or a psychologist’s dissertation, but Sandy Richardson was speaking from another perspective entirely. He was describing a phenomenon that would make the Lufthansa heist the most talked-about, most written-about, most

bandied-about crime since the Saint Valentine's Day Massacre. He was describing a phenomenon that would make Jimmy the Gent Burke, if not quite a matinee idol, at least something of a folk hero in the south of Queens. He was describing a phenomenon that would win for the Robert's Lounge Gang not only underworld notoriety and a coveted spot in the annals of crime, but public recognition as well. He was describing a phenomenon that would allow cheap hoods and assorted bad guys to bask in the public spotlight for months as their names were splashed in big, black, 120-point type across the headlines of New York's tabloids. And he was describing it far better than any ivory-tower academician ever could.

"A crime!" Richardson's voice was excited now. "It's always at the bottom of everything—all art, all life. And people love it. That's why they still want to know about us. It's years later, and they are standing on line just waiting to see that movie. Why? Because it's all about a crime, and a good one; better than most, if I do say so myself. It was a crime, it was clean, it was a big deal, and it worked. And that's it. But that's enough. That's why they always liked us. That's why they made a movie about us. We got away with it."

And he paused. "Well, for a long time."

"It's a funny thing where you wind up sometimes," put in Jazz Maffie. "What is this, being a celebrity? After all, we were thieves. We knocked off a joint, and that's all. But now people want our autographs. The cops knocked our heads together, and people want our autographs."

"We did something big, that's why," said Richardson. "It wasn't like knocking off a fruit stand."

"Well, that's true," said Maffie. "It was big, all right."

"It's just human nature," Richardson said. "People like thieves."

And then the old 1950 robbers pronounced a benison on their slick 1978 counterparts. “It was a beautiful moment,” wrote novelist and recently fired *Daily News* columnist Pete Hamill after an interview, “with the two master craftsmen speaking the way Joe DiMaggio must sometimes talk about Pete Rose.”

But there were a million things that could go wrong now that the job itself was over, and Jazz Maffie and Sandy Richardson knew every single one of them.

“Guys who’ll turn when you snap your fingers, you always have to look out for,” said Richardson. “And that’s one of the problems in that line of work. The planning can be perfect. The execution can be perfect, too. But you don’t really learn the caliber of the men you worked with until it’s all over. Only then do you find out what kind of deck you’ve been playing with all along, and then you find out the hard way, and then it’s too late. Not everybody can look the law square in the face every morning over breakfast for a couple of years without turning. Remember, we had Specs O’Keefe. And we’ll probably go to the grave cursing ourselves for that. The guys on this Lufthansa job, now they’ll see.”

“If they pull it off, I say, ‘hats off,’” offered Maffie. “But I doubt it. Today there’s an awful lot of talk among thieves. Talk will grab ‘em. You’d think it’d be so easy. Just keep your trap shut, and you’re home. But you reckon without human nature. A guy falls in love with the wrong broad, and it’s all over. Some other guy gets excited when a horse comes along at a hundred to one and tries to be a big shot, and it’s all over. Some other guy gets stewed and starts talkin’ big, and it’s all over. Some other guy who works for a livin’ tending bar cashes it in one day, and the next thing you know he’s out at the racetrack every weekday flashing a fat roll of C-notes, and it’s all over. Some other guy, he can’t wait to start spendin’ the money,

so he lets it go to his head, and suddenly he's got a Mercedes where he used to have a Ford, and it's all over. All it takes is one person, and forget it, it's over."

It wouldn't be long now before it was over, before the mob stockpiled the bodies like grain in a grain elevator, before the law slammed the heavy metal doors of the lockup with a resounding clank, before the image of Lufthansa as the perfect crime crumbled into dust. It wouldn't be long now. And when it happened, it would happen for all the reasons that Jazz Maffie and Sandy Richardson had spelled out back on that wintry day, the eleventh of December, when *The Brink's Job* opened in New York, the sourpuss FBI man knocked on a hotel door in Manhattan, and six guys from Queens got away with $10 million.

"In the end," said Maffie, with all the wariness and wisdom of a man who has spent several years of his life on the run, "the gnawing fear of getting caught just doesn't make it worthwhile. Not for all the money in the world."

Richardson just smiled.

They were a couple of guys in a pretty good position to know what they were talking about.

The major airlines deal with a very fickle clientele. It's a rare passenger who will stay loyal to any one carrier for very long. He's got no reason to. Normally, he'll go wherever he can get the best rate. The same rule applies in the cargo business, but more so. The slightest fluctuation in prices sends the airline brokers scampering from one freight-forwarding house to another, deserting one firm, searching out the best deals, often going full circle and winding up where they started before the end of the day. This

shopping around for pennies can be critical for the businessman; each cent shaved off the cost of a fifty-pound shipment can mean millions saved by year's end. But in the cargo field, there's a lot more than the tariffs to determine who does business with whom, or who doesn't do business with whom. There's theft, for instance. Nothing will lead a bulk cargo customer to ditch an airline faster. And now there had been a theft. A big theft.

All this must have been going through the minds of the top Lufthansa brass as they descended on their corporation's U.S. headquarters in East Meadow, Long Island early on the morning of December 11 for an emergency strategy session. The phone calls waking them up had come only minutes before. The problem was simple—what to say about that heisted $10 million. It was 7:15 A.M. when the German-speaking honchos sat down to talk about it, just three hours after the bandits had left Building 261. The hot lines were opened to Frankfurt and Munich and Hamburg. The conference call was extended to Baden-Baden to include an executive who was vacationing there. Options were thrashed out, alternatives weighed and rejected. For the company under siege, this was a case of thinking the unthinkable. And thinking it fast. For some kind of face clearly had to be put on the crisis. The only question was, what kind?

"As I see it, we've been hit and hit bad and we've only got two choices," somebody said as the meeting got under way. "And neither of them are any good. We can throw spitballs at the press and hope they buy it, or we can throw spitballs at the insurers and hope they buy it."

In the end, they decided to cast their spitballs at the press. But the press didn't buy it.

The choices were these. The Germans could lie outright—they could minimize their losses and deny everything, in a bid to avert a wholesale defection of their customers to the competition. And they could use the

press to spread those lies. Or they could simply write off a percentage of their customers, accept the inevitability of a stampede to the enemy, and offset it by exaggerating their losses to get a bigger payoff from the insurers. The whole thing was weighed on a strictly-cash basis after a hurried audit of the ledgers and the balance sheets. For the Lufthansa execs, it must have been a tempting notion to make it sound like a mint and bilk the insurance companies. But it was already a mint to begin with, and that was one scheme that simply would not wash. So instead, and not without regrets, Frankfurt elected to deny everything, to stonewall it, to take the press for a ride.

"Get out there," Felix E. Becker commanded his troops as soon as the decision was made, according to an account supplied by an executive source on Lufthansa's board of directors. "Get out there and throw spitballs at the press."

Becker was head of public relations for Lufthansa, and, like many of the top bosses in the firm, something of a mossback. But now he decided to "get out there" himself, out to Building 261 where the press would be massing, out into the fray that his company's policies had made inevitable. And he took with him several employees whose specialty was a little-known field called "crisis PR."

(It had been the job of a "crisis PR" man in Pennsylvania to make Metropolitan Edison look good during the Three Mile Island debacle—thankless task.)

Meanwhile, at about the same time, at the other end of town, the electronic bells of the police slip machine started clanging in city rooms and newsrooms all over Manhattan. Up until that moment, it had been a slow news day. Golda Meir's body lay in state in Jerusalem…Protesters heckled Menachem Begin when he came to pick up his Nobel Prize in Oslo…

Another tentative agreement was reached in the SALT II talks in Geneva… Locally, the Jets lost their bid for a wildcard berth in the pro football playoffs…And there were more horror stories about how poorly 911, the policy emergency number, had been working of late. A few half-decent stories, yes, but nothing very spectacular. So when the bells started going off like crazy on the police wire, the reporters gathered around the machine to see if it was anything worth getting excited about. It was.

The machine was one of those marvelous old-fashioned types that had been around forever, or at least so long that no one could remember when it first came. Somehow, it had never been retired, in a business where sooner or later almost everything else had fallen victim to electronic wizardry. Unlike the modern teletypes, the slip machine didn't bat out a thousand words a minute; it could only type as fast as the police operator on the other end of the line, and he usually relied on the old hunt-and-peck method, and spelling mistakes and typographical errors and mysterious interruptions were commonplace.

Now the machine spat out its message in its usual unbearably slow, halting, belabored fashion: "Report unknown perp or perps carrying gun and ski masks hold up Building 261, the Lufthansa cargo terminal at JFK, and make off with…" Here there was a pause in the typing, as if for effect, but probably the police typist was just searching for the right letter, or taking a sip from a cup of coffee. He wasn't a professional typist, after all, but just an ordinary radio-squad cop on disability duty. "…and make off with one million dollars or more. No further."

There didn't have to be anything further. That was enough. Within minutes, reporters and photographers and newsbreakers and TV teams and radio crews and free-lancers were out on the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway racing to Kennedy Airport.

The press came from the west—Manhattan. Becker's boys came from the east—Long Island. They converged on Building 261 within minutes of each other, around 8:30 A.M. There were already lawmen and workers all over the place, tripping each other up, but now, to add to the confusion, a covey of "crisis PR" officers had arrived to confront a bevy of reporters.

Standing inside the lobby of the building, Felix E. Becker gave the first of what would be several impromptu press conferences that day. He also made the first of what would be several estimates of the take, all of them wrong.

"Ze one-million-dollar estimate of ze robbery you heard is not accurate," said Becker in his heavy German accent. "Ve never keep more zan $500,000 in ze Val Room at any given time."

That set the tone he would follow for the rest of the day. By 10 A.M., the police indicated the actual figure was much higher than anyone could have guessed. They were still counting up the totals, but at least $3 million had been stolen, and probably more.

"The three-million-dollar estimate of the robbery you heard is not accurate," Becker said when reporters pressed him. "We never keep more than two million in the Val Room at any given time."

So it would go through the course of the day. There were five editions of The *Post* that day, and each one printed a slightly higher figure than the one before, as the truth slowly began to emerge.

By noon, it was learned that more than $5 million had been lifted. A cop let the word slip to a reporter before the Lufthansa people could shut him up. Again, the German attempted to lie their way to salvation.

"Oh, no," said Becker. "Absolutely not. It couldn't be. The five-million-dollar estimate of the robbery you heard is not accurate. Under no circumstances do we keep more than three million in the Val Room at any

given time. And that's at the very most. But I'm prepared to release the actual total of monies which are missing at this time. Exactly two and a half million dollars have been stolen. We expect to get it back momentarily."

There was a sign on the wall behind Becker as he spoke. "Cargo security depends on you," it said.

Even to this day, Lufthansa hems and haws if you ask one of their PR people about the money. And Becker still insists it was a one-in-a-million fluke that the Val Room was as cash-cluttered as it was when six thieves arrived one winter day to clean it out.

"They just happened to hit us at the very worst possible moment in our history," he says. "There had never been as much money as that in the Val Room at any other time before the robbery. There's never been as much money in there at any other time since. And there never will be."

Somehow, Felix E. Becker manages to keep a perfectly straight face when he says it.

But Jimmy the Gent Burke knew better. So did everyone along the wise-guy network in the south of Queens. For that matter, so did everyone who bought a newspaper that day, or watched Jim Jensen or Roger Grimsby or Chuck Scarborough on the tube that night.

In the days following the robbery, Jimmy the Gent was still cooling his heels in the Community Treatment Center halfway house, where he had six more weeks of his sentence to serve out. But the money was too far away, and he was getting restless fast. Accordingly, the ugly mug of that prissy therapist who led the transactional-analysis encounter groups had never looked more sickening to him, and Jimmy the Gent had never glowered at it more balefully. The tasteless food of the Cosmic Coffee Shop had never

tasted quite so unsavory to him, and it had never before seemed to promise botulism quite so irreversibly. And the spoons there had never been quite so greasy. The secretion-stained blankets of the Otel Bryant had never been quite so smelly or so threadbare, the pillows never so devoid of stuffing. And the armies of cockroaches that clambered through his room had never seemed more legion.

Yes, according to the law, Jimmy the Gent was still confined to the CTC in the days after the robbery; but that had never confined him very much in the past.

Now, five days after the heist, he summoned Fat Frankie the Driver, and the injunction he gave him was a familiar one. “Take me to Robert’s Lounge,” he barked.

It was a time during which both men should have been lying low, dodging the heat, and hoping it would blow over. But the heat hadn’t zeroed in on them yet, and the money buried beneath those floorboards in Howard Beach was a temptation nobody could resist, no matter what his intentions had once been. This was the unalterable, immutable fact of human nature that made most jobs fall apart in the end. For, as Jazz Maffie had warned, no instant millionaire ever keeps rule number one, the rule that says, “Do what you’ve been doing right along, don’t let the money go to your head, don’t do anything after a job that you wouldn’t have done before the job.”

So Fat Frankie headed for the swamps and marshlands of Howard Beach, and Jimmy the Gent yanked up the floorboards again and emerged from his home with a fistful of Ulysses S. Grants and Benjamin Franklins. Thus began an epic spending and drinking spree that would take him to more than a dozen Queens saloons.

He deliberately saved Robert’s Lounge for the last. When he arrived he was accorded a hero’s welcome that must have rivaled those given to

conquering warriors returning from the Crusades. Every hoodlum in the joint started cheering as Burke strode through the door. And Burke bowed grandly, like the ham that he was, in acknowledgement of those cheers. The crowd parted reverentially as he swaggered up to the bar that he had worn grooves in with his elbows over the years. “Anybody want my autograph?” he asked, and then, switching abruptly to the command form: “Drink up.”

They drank up.

Then he drew a few fifty-dollar notes into the scupper of the bar as cavalierly as if they were peanut shells. “I’m not the one who’s buying the rounds today,” he began.

There was silence. Puzzled looks. Hesitation. And then Jimmy the Gent bellowed out, “Let’s have a drink on Lufthansa!”

Everyone agreed that the Germans’ money tasted awfully good as it went down their gullets.

In the weeks ahead, that line would become a byword for wise guys throughout Queens. It would echo in dramshops from one end of the borough to the other. “Let’s have a drink on Lufthansa!” someone would shout. And then it was down the hatch, as the Red Baron picked up the tab.

The excitement generated by the job was infectious. The press and the public were suckers for it from Day One. The media went crazy as soon as it caught wind of the true dimensions of what had happened.

“Sensational, staggering, predawn swoop!” screamed the tabloids. “Perfect, panther-like pounce!” blared the radio newscasters. “Rollicking, roaring, romantic robbery!” related the TV anchormen. “A crime to capture the imagination of all New Yorkers, and all Americans!” teletyped the wire services.

Reporters, news commentators, headline writers, copy editors, sub-editors, and lovers of adjectives had a field day with Building 261. On the morning of December 11 and for two weeks running, the New York papers would vie with each other to see who could describe the historic holdup in the most hyperbolic terms. “High drama on the tarmac,” penned *Newsday*. “The most incredible caper since the Brink’s job,” decreed the *News*, and the *Post* shot back with its account of a “flawlessly executed job which went off with the lightninglike precision of a commando raid.” The *Star*, of course, topped them all with “the greatest inside job since the American Revolution.” Even the *Times* momentarily shucked its great-gray-lady image to write of this “daring and thoughtful exercise in larceny.”

From the DeStasio Rose Bar & Grill on Staten Island to the J&L Yankee Tavern in The Bronx, from the Wrong Number Lounge in Brooklyn and the Starting Gate Pub in Queens to the Rose of Killarney in Manhattan, in the bars in the boroughs they talked of nothing else for days. They thrashed out the crime again and again as they stood over their shotglasses, and each time the story was told it got better. It had all the ingredients; a bloodless opus that stumped every law enforcement official in town, it was clearly the work of underworld genius. It was, at least for a time, the proverbial perfect crime. It electrified the city, as few other happenings have ever done. And it made people smile.

Not since toymaker and human fly George Willig astonished early-morning Wall Street when he went up the sheer western wall of the World Trade Center with homemade mountain-climbing equipment had a single event done so much to make so many people in town happy. Picked up by the wire services, it ran on the front pages of newspapers nationwide. Picked up by the foreign correspondents, it ran on the front pages of newspapers around the world.

Of course, there were always those who resisted the notion that the Lufthansa heist was a kind of super-sport. Almost one thousand of those spoilsports, in fact, were being paid to solve it.

For the chase was on.

No sooner had the Lufthansa Six vanished into the black of night than the manhunt began. Crime-busting squads by the dozens descended on Buidling 261. Police brass by the score arrived on the scene. Keystone Kops by the hundreds poked through the blockhouse. Every inch of the place was lifted for fingerprints. Witnesses were interviewed until they were talked out. Bloodhounds romped through the hangar, picking up scents. And the lawmen immediately and optimistically and foolhardily set out to crack the case.

They might have stayed at home for all the good it did them.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Pursuit, Part I

(or, The Squads)

> “In a job this big, if you don’t get them in the first twenty-four hours after they strike, you never get them.”
>
> Queens District Attorney
> John J. Santucci

Linden Boulevard was as white as Leningrad that January afternoon, and the howling gusts of wind from the west whipped the snowflakes and the snow devils through the streets like bullets. The storm was still raging as John Angelo Sepe slid behind the wheel of his car, and he had all six lanes of the roadway to himself as he rolled out past the old U.S. Naval Hospital in St. Albans. A glance in his rearview mirror a few minutes later, somewhere beyond Merrick Boulevard, told Sepe that he was no longer alone in the blow. A tan four-door Mercury Montego had pulled in right behind him. The faces inside were set, severe, unsmiling. They looked like they meant business. The bulls had picked him up again. Sepe was just sizing up the Montego when he noticed that a blue Plymouth Fury had arrived out of nowhere behind it. Then a third car showed up, a beige Torino, a pretty smart number, and it ran a red light to catch up with the rest

of the procession. Finally, a black Chevy bomb came puttering along to join the lineup.

What was going on?

The cavalcade stayed with Sepe as he raced down Linden, trailing him for miles and miles through the snowbound streets of southern Queens. The cars changed lanes when he changed lanes, and they stopped for the lights that he stopped for, and they plowed through the lights that he plowed through. There was nothing subtle about these skip-tracers. Sepe couldn’t shake them, and he couldn’t figure them, and he got so absorbed in watching the reflection of their antics in the plexiglas that he neglected to look at the pavement in front of him and drove smack into the back of a slow-moving produce truck.

A second later, the Mercury Montego rammed him. Hard. Then the Plymouth Fury slammed headlong into the Montego. The driver of the Torino had a choice between oncoming traffic to the left, a snowdrift to the right, or the Fury dead ahead, so he went dead ahead, pell-mell into the pileup. The Chevy swerved and braked and skidded, but too late, and again there was the heavy, clangorous thud of metal on metal as bumpers and fenders crumpled up like accordions. The motorcade had come to the end of the road.

One by one now, the doors banged open and the occupants of those cars slowly dragged themselves out and revealed themselves. In the produce truck was a swarthy, weatherbeaten Greek, who got out and immediately started cursing everybody up and down in Greek. He had inadvertently led that train of cars which had wound up welded together as if by a hand on a soldering iron, but the Greek was the only one in that train who didn’t belong there. The rest of that bunch deserved each other.

There was Lufthansa bandit John Angelo Sepe, for instance. Sepe, a little bit black-and-blue now, was the harried object of all this attention in the first place. And then there was the law. Four carloads of it. And all of it pitted against a cheap, small-time hood who had suddenly crashed into the big time. Out of the Montego came a pair of *federales*, government men. They were slightly shook up, but not too much the worse for wear, and they wore the three-piece suits that were one of the marks of their trade. From the Fury came a couple of plainclothes New York City bulls, disguised in painters' overalls that were appropriately paint-splotched. They were only minimally rattled. Then two Port Authority detectives clad in epaulets and full battle-dress uniforms stumbled out of the Torino. They were merely rumpled. And finally, two state troopers emerged from the Chevrolet. Their Stetsons had been knocked askew.

It was a comical spectacle there on the snow-besprinkled asphalt of Linden Boulevard, where a six-car collision had brought together one criminal suspect, eight over-eager lawmen, and a swarthy Greek truck driver.

After the smash-up, the row was on. Sepe blamed the accident on the Greek, and the Greek blamed the accident on Sepe. They almost started swinging. They gesticulated wildly and hurled the vilest epithets at one another, but they were mutually exclusive epithets, for the Greek's were in Greek and Sepe's were in Italian, and neither man could understand the other's broken English.

While these two unfortunates were thus engaged, the lawmen did the only sensible thing they could do under the circumstances. "Let's blow," said one of the city cops.

They hot-footed it out of there.

There was not the faintest sign of recognition among the eight crime-fighters from the four different squads, though each of them knew who each of the others were. They had seen each other before, at policemen's balls and law enforcement barbecues, on tails and stakeouts in the past. But this time no one said a word. There wasn't a glance or a nod or a handshake exchanged. There was nothing of the customary swapping of licenses and registration that comes after most accidents. There was no fanfare, no ceremony. The drivers merely disengaged their prowl cars, and then the eight minions of the law drove sheepishly off in their four separate directions. They had some explaining to do back at the home office, some accident reports to fill out. The Lufthansa probe would have to wait. The parade was over, and the tail was off. At least for the moment.

And John Angelo Sepe and a swarthy Greek truck driver were left standing by themselves in the chill of Linden Boulevard, cursing each other in foreign tongues as the snowflakes swirled and the blizzard blizzed all around them.

The cars of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the New York City Police Department, the Port Authority Police Department, and the New York State Police Department had all come cruising down Linden because of a simple, unpleasant truth: the four big law enforcement agencies charged with breaking the Lufthansa case didn't trust each other very much. That's a bit of an understatement. The squads didn't trust one another any further than they could have thrown $10 million worth of unmarked, untraceable bills and unregistered, unsecured jewelry.

And with good reason, as it turned out.

That was why there was such an abundance of manpower in pursuit of Sepe. The troops were checking up on each other's movements, as well as Sepe's. Sepe had to be watched, that much was clear. Early on, he had been

named as a key suspect in the case. But did he have to be watched four times over? Apparently so, for these flatfoots were incapable of joining forces, or of dispatching just one of their number to shadow their quarry and report back to the rest of them. Locked in a pattern of fierce interagency rivalries, they seemed doomed to spend as much time sabotaging one another's cases as they did in trying to advance their own.

It was a problem that was all tied up in the personalities of the squads. The FBI, for instance, had long labored under the delusion that it had been handed a personal charter from the Founding Fathers way back in 1776, a charter to fight a never-ending battle for truth, justice, and the American Way—most of all, the American Way. Or at least the Bureau's warped conception of it. Matched against this matchless arrogance was the NYPD, which knew the Naked City as few others would ever know it. The city bulls resented the notion that a bunch of out-of-towners on the federal payroll, to whom New York was just another assignment, could possibly solve the case before they could. Then there were the PA cops. Assigned to police Kennedy, they put such stock in their own airport acumen that they tried to put a stranglehold on the place, and they hated to see any other law in the vicinity of the hangars. Finally, the Albany-based troopers of the NYSPD wouldn't give up on a case this big either, and they certainly wouldn't share it if they could possibly help it. So everything in the investigation had to be done four times, including automobile crashes.

But the fender-bender was just a dramatic example of a daily phenomenon. It would happen again and again. The four squads wouldn't trust one another for the time of day, they hid valuable tidbits from one another, and they leaked embarrassing information that would damage one another. They often found themselves at cross-purposes as they maneuvered to break the case and maneuvered to outmaneuver each other. They were

incapable of sharing information, and the duplication of investigative effort was absurd.

Take the candy store at the bottom of Queens, near Seagirt Avenue in the Rockaways. It was a suspected transfer point for some of the loot from Building 261. Hoodlums came and went all day long, and the place had to be watched. An old-fashioned, one-car stakeout might have worked, with a single agent quietly writing down license plate numbers. But four cars showed up instead, for if one squad planned the stakeout, the others all had to appear to see what their rivals were up to. It was a move that had all the subtlety of a sledgehammer. Eight agents sat on the hoods of their four cars, reading newspapers or leafing through penny dreadfuls, trying to be inconspicious, just sitting there in the icy chill of winter, pretending not to recognize who anybody else was, though everyone already knew who everybody else was.

So did the crooks, of course, and the stakeout was a miserable failure. It would not be the last. The lawmen logged hundreds of thousands of hours—and spent hundreds of thousands of dollars—duplicating each other's efforts, keeping abreast of each other's probes, trailing each other's operatives and informants. There was even one report, unconfirmed, that the FBI wiretapped the NYPD just to see how New York's finest were making out—without a court order of course, as if the G-men were dealing with just another common criminal. The bill for all these shenanigans was astronomical. Based on salary, overtime, lab expenses, and the replacement of four banged-up auto fenders, it's estimated the four squads spent well over $10 million, the amount these comical coppers were supposedly trying to retrieve in the first place. And all of it was footed by city, state, and federal taxpayers.

The bottom line of the botched Lufthansa investigation was a single, uncomfortable fact. Each of the major law enforcement agencies working the case wanted the glory of solving it for themselves. Had they worked together in any meaningful way, they might have found that there was enough glory to go around. But they didn't work together; they couldn't—or wouldn't. Not surprisingly, no one was caught at first.

Not surprisingly, too, as the days and the months and the investigation wore on, the agencies and their agents became more and more like cartoon caricatures of themselves.

John Angelo Sepe was still a prime target in this period, and everywhere he went, the eight cops from the four squads followed. They covered him like a glove. Then there was that memorable day in Janaury when they followed his car east-bound on the Belt Parkway, out to where the name changes and the road becomes the Sunrise Highway. When he veered southward, hard, on the Francis Lewis Boulevard, they tailed him for another mile or so to the intersection of Hook Creek Boulevard and the Hungry Harbor Road. This was the Rosedale section of Queens, a residential neighborhood at the eastern edge of the metropolis, just a stone's throw from Long Island and the county line.

Sepe's destination was a corner drugstore there. He was about to receive some instructions from Jimmy the Gent Burke in a phone booth at the back of the main aisle, near the Dr. Scholl's display, via the pay-phone-to-pay-phone method. It seemed the only way to go about his business with the law breathing so heavily down his neck. At least this way he'd be able to get a message through, and his tormentors wouldn't have a clue as to whom he was speaking with. But his tormentors had other plans.

When Sepe pulled up to the drugstore, the eight cops from the four squads pulled up alongside him. When Sepe jumped out of his car, they

jumped out of their cars too. When Sepe walked through the doors, all eight of his pursuers walked in right after him.

It was a slow, midweek afternoon out in Rosedale, and the owner of the pharmacy, a pleasant, silver-haired, jockey-sized Queens man, was pleased and surprised when the bells started jingling and nine customers, strangers to the neighborhood, trooped into his shop. Sometimes, these days, that was all the business he would get in the course of the entire afternoon.

“Good day, gentlemen,” he addressed the crowd giving them a winning saleman’s smile. “Which one of your gentlemen would like to be served first? Whom can I help?”

But of course they paid absolutely no attention to him. Sepe looked at his watch and headed straight for the phone, and by the time he reached it, it was already ringing. “It’s for me,” he muttered vaguely in the direction of the druggist. Then, “Out of my way, old man.”

The silver-haired, jockey-sized druggist looked puzzled, but he said nothing. Instead, he turned to face his other eight customers. “Good day, gentlemen,” he began all over again, good humor in no way diminished by Sepe’s rebuff. “What can I get for you?”

The eight cops from the four squads flashed tin. They asked him to move aside. “Police business,” one of them explained. Then they turned their backs on him and ignored him.

Sepe was inside the booth by now, and the folding doors were already closed behind him. The druggist described what happened next. The eight cops from the four squads took up positions surrounding the booth, clustering as close to it as possible, climbing on top, sticking their faces flush against the glass, just ten inches from the mouthpiece, and pricking up their ears so they could hear every single word that was spoken. They did everything but yank the receiver out of Sepe’s hands, and it remains a

mystery as to why they didn’t do that. They must have looked like college kids about to see how many people they could stuff into that phone booth. It was a bizarre scene. The FBI agents stood somewhere between the Majestic Cocoa Butter and the Johnson’s Baby Powder. The NYPD plainclothesmen stood between the Q-tips and the Vidal Sassoon shampoo. The PA cops leaned against the counter with the Chanel Number Five and the Nina Ricci. The NYSPD troopers apparently stood atop the shelf with the Revlon Nail Enamel and the Campho-Phenique.

The eight cops from the four squads strained to identify the voice on the other end of the line, but it was indiscernible; they strained to hear what Sepe was talking about, but it was only the weather.

In the end, Sepe got so claustrophobic, or perhaps so sick of talking about nothing but the weather, that he hung up and stormed out of the phone booth. He didn’t say anything to the lawmen, and they didn’t say anything to him. But they cleared a path for him as he left. And Sepe, mad as a bull, charged head-on into a whole counter of medications and beauty aides. He toppled them with a crash into the aisle, and kicked them about the floor. Then he turned on his heel and walked out, as the pharmacopoeia came tumbling down. He didn’t walk out alone.

John Angelo Sepe got back into his car and drove off like a fiend down the Hungry Harbor Road. Seconds later, those eight cops from the four squads also got back into their cars, and they too drove off like fiends in never-ending pursuit down the very same Hungry Harbor Road.

Back at the drugstore in Rosedale, a silver-haired, jockey-sized druggist surveyed the wreckage in his shop. He stood alone amid the piles of pharmaceutical products scattered on every side of him like junk in a junkyard, and wondered what it had all been about. The shaving cream, the nasal decongestant, the balsam-and-protein instant hair conditioner, the Dr.

Scholl's foot pads—the mass of pharmacopoeia that littered those floors served as mute testimony to one of the more extraordinary law enforcement rites ever witnessed in the New York City area.

The handling—the mishandling, rather—of the Lufthansa probe would shatter forever the myth of cooperation among the different arms of the law. For these were the foibles of a gang of cops that couldn't shoot straight—and spent as much time shooting crooked at each other as they did shooting crooked at the bad guys.

The result, of course, was that the bad guys got away.

Every FBI office in the country has one, and the powerful branch in Queens is no exception. The familiar jowls, the double chin, the unsmiling eyes, the rigid, bulldog face that seems to look right through you. It's the face of J. Edgar Hoover, framed and autographed, and it looks at you from beyond the grave. Next to it, displayed in an only slightly less prominent position on the mahogany wall, is a picture of William H. Webster, the Bureau's current director. Both of the faces seem inordinately severe. There is not a trace of the frivolous in either one of them.

At the other end of the borough, seven miles south-southeast, the pictures and the faces are very different, indeed. This is the brick-and-cinderblock building that houses the NYPD's 113th Precinct, whose jurisdiction takes in John F. Kennedy International Airport. The first thing you see when you walk through the door is a rugged, mustachioed New Yorker's face, the face of a man who liked to speak softly but carry a big stick. It's Theodore Roosevelt in a rare old photograph that was taken when he served as New York City Police Commissioner. Upstairs in the interview room is another surprise. It's the late Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie,

gaunt, clad in battle regalia, and resplendent in the one hundred medals he liked to wear. The cops keep Selassie around to rattle the Selassie-worshipping Rastafarian drug smugglers from Jamaica they interrogate.

The different pictures on the walls seem to emblemize the diametrically opposed attitudes and backgrounds of the two agencies that would wind up doing the bulk of the work on the Lufthansa case. It was, at bottom, merely a difference in style between the two units; but out on the street, this was translated into a difference in substance, as well.

The regulation garb of the FBI agent, for instance, is a three-piece suit with the proper blends of wool. He'll wear that whether he's undercover or just sitting at his desk. The city cop, on the other hand, laughs at the idea of a dress code, and wears whatever the assignment seems to demand. Similarly, on a stakeout, the G-man will sit upright in his car, with his arms folded and his eyes constantly on the prowl, even if nothing happens—as nothing usually does happen—for hours at a time. But the local cop will be much more likely to sit through the long drudgery of the waiting with an Eleventh Avenue slouch and a six-pack of Budweiser, and he might even doze off every now and then.

In the FBI offices, you'll find top-of-the-line RCA domestic television sets purchased by Uncle Sam. But in the budget-strapped station houses of the NYPD, the detectives usually rely on Hitachis borrowed from the stolen-property clerk's office.

At the Bureau, they're very reluctant to talk about an ongoing investigation like Lufthansa, and the offices themselves are silent. There are thick rugs on the floors, and there are walls and doorways and cordoned-off areas that are off limits even to many of the agents themselves. In the NYPD squad rooms, however, they're much less formal, much more willing to talk, and the offices themselves are noisier. The concrete floors

are covered with nothing but cigarette ashes and pencil points, and the rooms are wide open and separated from each other by nothing more than shabby green partitions, which are probably a good three or four feet shy of the ceiling anyway.

If your boss wants to see you at the FBI, he'll buzz his secretary and relay the instructions. Then the secretary will ring for you on the intercom, and a crisp, metallic, businesslike voice will come on the line. "Mr. Gordon," the voice will say, "Mr. Anderson would like to see you on the third floor when you get a chance." Which of course will mean right away. But at the NYPD, buzzers and intercoms are unheard of, and secretaries are a luxury rumored to exist only at One Police Plaza, the modern headquarters building downtown. If your boss wants to see you in one of the squad rooms, he'll go about it a little less formally, for he has only to shout out across the room so he can be heard above the phone calls and the chatter and the din and the general rumpus: "Hey, Jacoby, tell the sarge to get his ass the hell in here on the double!"

This difference in style spills over into every phase of investigative work.

The city bulls were at their best and their most comfortable when they were out on New York's mean streets; they walked them as though they owned them. They had grown up on those streets, or most of them had, and they knew and loved them. But the feds seemed to avoid those streets like the plague. They were much more comfortable at their desks, where they invariably did their best work. To the government men, those lovely, filthy, naughty, incorruptible city streets were as foreign as China. The agents were unbeatable at their desks, but out on the teeming streets, they were mere wimps and milksops and mollycoddles.

This divergence in focus was partially due to an unpleasant fact of life that sooner or later affects all crook-stalkers: the capital budget.

As a branch of the United States Department of Justice, the FBI was able to draw on an enormous government operating budget, one not quite as bountiful as the Bureau had asked for, yet bountiful enough by any other yardstick. The FBI was dependent for its success on this ever-flowing cash spigot, which allowed it to field thousands of agents and man the best-equipped crime laboratories in the world. The money also made it possible to develop a network of tipsters and paid informants that became the Bureau's eyes and ears inside organized crime. This was built up during the late years of the Hoover dynasty, and involved papering gangland lairs with enough green to open up nickel-and-dime Murphy men and any other wise guys with sound mob connections. Once the network was running, it became largely self-perpetuating, just as long as the money was around in large enough quantities to grease its gears. Of course, every now and then, a stoolie would get bumped off when the mob learned he or she was talking. Then the FBI bagmen would hit the streets again in search of new recruits. But basically the network ran smoothly. Bureau accountants would send the cash to fake names registered at obscure hotels in New Jersey, or to post office boxes in Connecticut. In turn, the informants would call in whatever scraps they were able, or willing, to unearth. And so the FBI agents, who would definitely have preferred it that way anyway, now had a reason to become deskbound. They had to stay in the office and take the calls from their canaries. The money had bought those canaries in the first place, and now it was buying the agents the freedom to stay where they wanted to stay, where they felt they belonged—at their desks.

Money was also responsible for sending the NYPD "gold shields" out to where they felt they belonged—the streets. But in their case, it was *lack* of

money that put them there.

The force was still reeling from the city's prolonged jousting with default and its near-bankruptcy in 1975. Plagued by manpower shortages and budgetary woes of every description, it was thus forced by the ironbound keepers of the balance sheets to rely more and more on good, old-fashioned street sense than anything else, and it did. The cops knew they had to draw the line somewhere, so they cut back on desk work and pounded the pavement as never before. They let things slide where it made sense to let them slide. In Chinatown, for instance, they had long ago learned that if you raid one of the On Leong Tong's gambling houses and shut it down on Tuesday, you're going to have an upsurge in the incidence of street robberies and extortion on Wednesday. The tongs, after all, have to earn a living somehow. So the raids stopped, the fan-tan and the pie-gow tables stayed open in the parlors of Mott and Baxter and Division Streets, and the crime rate dipped all over Chinatown. And the police did less work, not more. It was all mandated by the New York City fiscal crunch, but it was common sense too, street sense, this selective nonenforcement of the law.

It was something the FBI could never grasp. For there was a lot more than money—or lack of money—at the bottom of it. There was personality and background. The local cops were creatures of the streets, and specifically the wondrous streets of New York. The federals couldn't find their way from Penn Station to Grand Central, and to them, Sixth Avenue was always the Avenue of the Americas. They were much more likely to come from jerkwater towns like Waco and Spokane and Jacksonville than they were to hail from New York, and they had no street smarts at all, except whatever they had picked up back in Waco and Spokane and Jacksonville.

In a city whose phone books rang with the resonance of names like Abbracciamento and LaLagonzollilo and Ostrowski and Zwetschkenbaum and Zzherobrouskievskieskieea, which is the last name in the Manhattan white pages, the FBI boasted of agents with names like Anderson and Hotop and Laster and Rogers and Whitehead. In a city whose populace was thirty percent Jewish, thirty percent Catholic, thirty percent black and Puerto Rican, and slightly less than five percent WASP, the FBI somehow managed to staff their New York offices with agents who were more than fifty percent WASP. Not exactly the best crime-fighting technique if you lived inside the boiling ethnic-religous-racial volcano that was the Big Apple. The feds lived inside that Big Apple, but they were not of it. Indeed, they often seemed more like part of an occupying army.

And it was a well-disciplined army at that—another difference between the two agencies. The government men had a reputation for personal incorruptibility—exaggerated, no doubt, since the Bureau never washed its dirty laundry in public. But still, it had a pretty good record. Since the FBI's founding in 1908, only one agent has ever gone to prison. By contrast, the local cops have gotten into trouble for everything from cooping and graft to robbery and murder. And their suicide, alcoholism, and divorce rates rank among the highest in surveys of law enforcement personnel nationwide.

It was no wonder, then, with these glaring differences, that the FBI and the NYPD hated each other's guts, that the bulls and the federals veered clear of one another, as if each heard the other jangling lepers' bells from around their necks. They were traditional enemies, hopelessly locked in a conflict that was decades old, so old that no one remembered anymore what first caused it. But whatever it was, it was poison to law enforcement. The two sapped each other's strength, and in the meantime, the felons walked

the streets unmolested. When the NYPD and the FBI squared off, it was said, the city wasn't big enough for the both of them.

Nothing would underscore this more effectively than the Lufthansa probe, where the agencies would collide with the frequency of electrons in a nuclear reactor. It was a question of outlook, more than anything else, that lay at the bottom of those collisions. Even semantics.

The cops of the NYPD lived in a grim and ghastly world of "floaters" (bodies in the river); "jumpers" (suicides from buildings or bridges); "roasts" (bodies burnt to a cinder in tenements); and "ventilation jobs" (bodies with enough bullet holes in them to allow for the circulation of air). But the agents of the FBI had little truck with that world, or with the crass and colorful vocabulary that went with it. They were far more comfortable in a world of Stengelese and Newspeak—a post-Watergate world where people don't lie, but merely "misspeak themselves." A world where fat farms become "weight-control communities," where vacuum cleaners become "high-velocity suction-cleaning implements," where zippers become "slide fasteners," where housewives become "homemakers," where unwed mothers become "single parents," and where the handicapped become the "physically challenged."

Amid these verbal contortions, then, it made sense that the record-book stickup that chill December morning in the south of Queens should become known forever as "the matter of Building 261." That was how the FBI would always refer to it.

It was an investigation that was top-heavy from the start. Everyone wanted to get into the act. Nearly 1500 crime-fighters went to work. More than twenty investigative bodies entered the case: the bigger guns of the law, the

lesser guns of the law, the squads no one ever heard of, the popguns of the law; hangers-on from county, city, state, bi-state, federal, and international organizations; private agencies, private dicks, mediums, bloodhounds; also-rans hoping against hope for that one big break that would solve the heist and allow them to put together this gigantic jigsaw puzzle of crime, a puzzle so vast and so nebulous that its scope took in the entire length and breadth of the Naked City.

Leading the onslaught, of course, were the FBI and the NYPD.

But not far behind, and ahead of the rest of the pack, was the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey. The PA was charged with administering the bridges and tunnels that link the two states, and it also ran the port facilities of New York Harbor, the World Trade Center, the bus terminals, and the three local airports—LaGuardia, Newark, and JFK. Among the law enforcement doyens, the PA's police force was considered brash and amateurish. Always a bit of a maverick, the bi-state agency had long viewed Kennedy as its own private fiefdom, and its cops resented it whenever any other squads started meddling on their turf.

Then there were the professional meddlers of the New York State Police Department. They didn't interfere very much in city-based crimes—unless, that is, those crimes were big enough and glamorous enough to generate splashy headlines for them. Then they'd dash into the fray like bats out of hell. The matter of Building 261 was big enough—more than big enough. And so the troopers, like everyone else, succumbed to its lure.

Queens District Attorney John J. Santucci was another force to be reckoned with, though sometimes he seemed to operate more as a one-man force than anything else. Famed for his blatant penchant for seeking publicity, Santucci was nonetheless loved by the press, since he did it in such a disarming manner. His openness and candor were all the more

astonishing in a probe where everybody else was so secretive. Santucci was the only one to boast publicly that he'd get the crooks before anyone else did, and particularly before the FBI did. He was the only one ingenuous enough to admit what all the other squads already knew, but what none of them would ever dream of putting into words—that there was a race on; that in spite of what they claimed, the agencies were not working together in a joint bid to bust the case wide open for the good of the commonweal; that, rather, they were interfering with each other at every step of the game, competing with each other, sabotaging each other's best efforts, and each trying to get home first, each questing for the glory of cracking the case, and willing to share it with no one. Santucci might have been as glory-hungry as all the others put together, but at least he made no bones about admitting it.

Then there was the Organized Crime Strike Task Force for the Eastern District. These were the government lawyers who'd assemble criminal evidence and make sure it was obtained legally—or at least made to look like it was obtained legally—so no smartass mob defense counsel could ever move to get it thrown out of court on a technicality. Their job was to build airtight cases against prospective defendants long before they were even arrested, while they were still at the suspect stage. As the legal arm of the Justice Department, it was the Task Force, working with the FBI, that would eventually build the case against Louis Werner.

After the FBI, the NYPD, the PA, the NYSPD, the Queens DA, and the OCSTF, loped the also-rans. For there were more than a dozen other squads in on the multi-pronged probe, all of them gung-ho, but some with only peripheral jurisdiction at best.

Lufthansa's own crack security force was flown in from Munich on the morning after the theft. This was headed by a German security kommendant

named Arno Peik, a goose-stepping, heel-clicking Prussian who went around administering lie-detector tests, and interviewing and intimidating employees in the language they felt most comfortable in. Peik had a nasty habit. If things weren't going too well, or if he felt he hadn't been given a satisfactory answer to one of his questions, he would smash his fist into the palm of his hand and look menacing. He was good at that. Peik was an ugly customer.

"Ve vill get to ze bottom of zis," he would say in the thickest of accents, and it was always first-person plural, never first-person singular. Then the fist would curl up again, hurtle through the air, and land with a thud in the palm of the hand. "Ve vill get to ze bottom of zis."

But he never did.

Then there was the International Criminal Police Organization, better known as Interpol, which was brought into the Lufthansa inquiry at the request of the FBI. The fifty-seven-year-old agency is much misunderstood by laymen. Its name conjures up romantic notions of foreign agents, cloak-and-dagger operatives, multi-aliased spies. But actually, Interpol deals with little more than paperwork and computer printouts. It is a seven-story filing cabinet tucked away in Saint-Cloud, a suburb of Paris, and it serves as a central clearing house for information on over 700,000 criminals worldwide. It has no police force of its own, and it is not an investigative body in the standard sense. Yet when it comes to assembling dossiers of suspects likely to have staged a $10 million airport super-heist, the secretaries and button-pushers of Interpol are unbeatable. They supplied the FBI with the names of tarmac toughs from Kennedy to Düsseldorf, from Palma de Mallorca to Singapore, from Botany Bay to Buenos Aires.

As it turned out, however, they never had to go any further than Ozone Park and the south of Queens.

Brink’s got into the act, too. Since it was a vehicle known as Brink’s number 69319 that was turned around empty on Friday, when it had come to pick up the money that was later stolen on Monday, the armored-car people felt entitled to send their own team of experts to look into the affair.

The European-based insurers were also upset about the way things had worked out. After all, they were the ones who had to cough up that $10 million in debits, minus only the piddling $50,000 liability, which Lufthansa had to make up. So the insurance companies brought in the gumshoes, eight or nine private investigators who poked around in the best Sam Spade–Philip Marlowe tradition, nursing enormous hangovers, and looking to help peroxided dames who weren’t quite on the up and up. But the results of their efforts, unfortunately, were significantly less successful than those of their fictional counterparts.

When things got really bad in a big case, in a stake as big as the matter of Building 261, someone always brought in the mediums. So before too long, someone brought in the mediums. Perhaps the city cops were desperate, or perhaps they just wanted to make the newspaper-reading public happy, or perhaps they just wanted to show people they were trying every possible angle. In any event, by invitation, two or three psychics with hot-line links to the spirit world showed up. They queried the specters and apparitions who were wise to such things as the whereabouts of a missing $10 million grubstake, and then one of them pronounced her verdict. “The money has gone to a very faraway place,” she began. “The spirits tell us that you will never see it again, in its present form.”

The mediums were right about that.

Then there were those lawmen with the most dubious of jurisdictions who, nonetheless, couldn’t stay away.

For starters, there was the Treasury Department, keeper of the Almighty Dollar, which came into the Lufthansa inquiry solely at its own behest, and because there was U.S. currency involved. Lots of it.

There was the Customs Service, which entered the case because the stolen goods were part of an international shipment that hadn't yet received its proper Customs clearance. And never would. Legally, the only grounds the Customs people had for getting involved was that they were charged with clearing all overseas parcels. Presumably, they were trying to get the shipment back from the thieves just so they could clear it.

(And technically, because of a quirk of Customs law, if they ever did get the plunder back from the thieves, they would be forced to return it to them just as soon as it passed muster.)

The Nassau County Police Department also showed up, establishing jurisdiction on the theory that the stolen money might be transported across the county line into Long Island. Very possibly so. But on the same theory, the county cops in the sixty-one other counties of New York State could have gotten involved. Or, for that matter, the county cops in the fifty-eight counties of California, the sixty-seven counties of Florida, or the more than three thousand counties nationwide. All of them had an excuse, had they wanted one, to barge into the Lufthansa investigation, an investigation that was standing-room-only already.

For it is common knowledge among crime-fighters that if you're looking for jurisdiction—even when it's obvious that you don't have any—you never have to look very far.

Take the Transit Authority, for instance. The job of the TA is to supervise the 134 miles of the New York City subway system, and the job of the TA Police is to insure that the hundreds of thousands of straphangers who ride that system daily do so in relative security. Not surprisingly, the

TA cops like to surface from time to time. “Coming out of the hole,” they call it in the trade, and everyone wants to come out. The never-ending rumble of the trains and the blackness of that subterranean world gets pretty depressing. So when the matter of Building 261 came around, the TA cops came out of the hole, entering the case on the preposterous grounds that the subway might have been used by one of the bandits to expedite his getaway. They got nowhere, of course, and soon they were back in the hole where they belonged. (One of the bandits had, in fact, escaped on an IND train out of Brooklyn—Mr. Y. But as far as legitimate jurisdiction was concerned, so what?)

Then there was the Housing Authority, which plays landlord to thousands of tenants in the city-sponsored projects. The Housing Authority Police force was supposed to patrol the grounds, elevators, and hallways of those projects to waylay potential muggers. But the projects are grim, lightless, stuffy; the beat is a thankless one; and the housing cops get restless, too. So they came into the probe on the theory that the swag from Lufthansa’s Val Room might have been hidden in an apartment somewhere in one of the hundreds of city housing projects scattered about the five boroughs. (It wasn’t.)

Finally, the peace officers of the Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority dreamt up the most imaginative of excuses so they could come aboard too. The TBTA is the agency that runs most of the city’s toll facilities, including the Triborough Bridge, the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge, the Brooklyn-Battery Tunnel, and the Queens-Midtown Tunnel, among others. Normally, the cops of the TBTA do little more than police the toll plazas for scofflaws who are out to save a dollar. But now they claimed that the crooks had used one of their facilities to transport the stolen goods. This was a serious breach of the authority’s charter, the TBTA declared, since it

involved the trafficking of hot property through the bridges and tunnels it controlled. Under a provision of its charter dealing with “illicit interborough commerce,” the TBTA was empowered to investigate any such misdeeds. So the TBTA climbed aboard the Lufthansa bandwagon too, and joined the rest of the heavies—and soon fell flat on its face. It was simply outclassed. Not that its rivals were all that classy, but it was in over its head, way over, and before long, the cops of the TBTA were back to where they belonged, policing the toll plazas for scofflaws who were out to save a dollar.

Nobody, nowhere, had any better luck, nohow.

Yet it was a formidable list of pursuers that had arrived to pit themselves against the wiles of the Lufthansa Six. It was a twenty-ring circus out there. SRO. Wall-to-wall bluecoats.

Of all the uniformed squads represented in New York City, only the Sanitation Police didn’t get involved in the matter of Building 261. And with all the reasons advanced or invented by all the other squads as to why they *did* get involved, it is a wonder that the sanit cops *didn’t*. After all, they had the grounds to enter the case, too. They could always have said it was a city garbage truck operated by Ostrowski unionists that hauled away the empty parcels left behind in Stacks’ apartment after the job. They could always have said it was the grinder on that dump truck into whose metal teeth those parcels had been fed—the parcels with the distinctive Red Baron logo emblazoned across the top, the parcels that had once contained ten million dollars and zero zero cents. The parcels that had vanished one December morning as utterly as the scratch inside.

“The money has gone to a very faraway place,” the mediums said. They looked at each other and shook their heads knowingly. They knew what they were talking about. They never doubted those psychic vibrations for a minute. And they had just held counsel with the sprites of Mammon.

“A very faraway place…”

More than ever these days, a German security obermeister named Arno Peik was starting to realize it, too. Peik went around glowering at whoever was available for him to glower at. He looked in desperation for the money of his bosses as if it were his own. He worked over the Lufthansa employees with more relish and less civility than ever. He tried to break those Lufthansa employees as if they were enemy soldiers in the last war. He was an ugly customer.

“Ve vill get to ze bottom of zis,” Arno Peik would say. Then the clenched fist would come leaping through the air like lightning and pound into the palm of the hand with a vengeance again and again. “Ve vill get to ze bottom of zis.”

But Peik never did. And neither did anybody else.

It was going to be a quiet, candlelit dinner, just the two of them. Stuffed mushrooms, chicken cacciatore, Italian red wine in chilled glasses. The sounds of waves lapping up on the shore of the Great Peconic Bay. The gentle winds off the sea that rattled the windows of the house.

John Angelo Sepe and his wife had just settled down at the dining room table when Sepe happened to glance outside the big picture windows, and saw what it was that had really caused those windows to rattle. It wasn’t the wind at all; it was the men on the other side. It was the eight cops from the four squads, all gazing in at Sepe and his chicken cacciatore—all peering in fixedly, narrowly, searchingly, with the same rush of feeling of old men at a peep show.

Sepe didn’t get out here very often. He did most of his crooked dealings and his other work back in Ozone Park, and he kept an apartment there just

for convenience. The Robert's Lounge Gang liked their people to be within striking distance of the airport, and within walking distance of the tavern, just in case they needed them. But Sepe also had this big home out near the harbor of Mattituck in Suffolk County, on the eastern edge of Long Island. And once or twice a week, when the call of the rackets wasn't so pressing, he headed for the Long Island Expressway and drove out to see his wife.

This was his retreat in the exurbs, the place where he could temporarily leave the city and his life of crime behind, the place where he could unwind in innocent family pastimes like a chicken cacciatore dinner.

But now they had followed him here, too.

Sepe must have blanched when he saw their faces. He had seen them all before, of course, and so many times on so many tails that he knew them all by heart. The eight cops from the four squads. He groaned involuntarily. He glanced up at his wife and they both shook their heads in disbelief. They looked out those picture windows into a sea of blue.

There were the two Port Authority cops, with their elbows on the windowsill and their faces pressed like putty against the glass. There were the two city bulls a few feet overhead, staring intently into the dining room from their perch on the branches of a pine tree. There were the two state troopers, one of whom had been boosted atop the shoulders of the other for a better view. And there were the two FBI agents, seated cross-legged on the lawn chairs they had brought, taking notes all the while.

"Meal appears to be chicken cacciatore," wrote one of the G-men in his notebook.

As usual, not a word was exchanged among the eight cops from the four squads. Each of the two-man crime-busting teams pretended each of the other teams did not exist. But it was a fact that each team was there only because all of the others were. They crowded around those dining room

windows as earlier they had crowded around the phone booth in the drugstore in the Rosedale section of Queens, straining to hear every word that was spoken, breathing the same air because they were only inches apart. Jockeying for position. Tripping each other up. And yet, somehow, still managing to ignore each other completely.

The lawmen would continue to trip each other up—and to ignore each other completely—as the saga of cops and robbers continued to unfold. They would trip one another up both literally and figuratively, for the chronic inability of these crime-fighters to work together left them with the ability to do only one thing together—torpedo the entire Lufthansa investigation.

That they did.

The balance of the story of that evening in Mattituck was originally provided by one of the participants, and later confirmed by a spokesman for one of the other squads that were involved.

It was cold out there in front of John Angelo Sepe's dining room windows. The wind whipping in off the bay was now an icy wind. The FBI agents didn't like being cold. It was bad enough that they were away from their desks. They couldn't drop out of the stakeout; they would freeze to death before they did that. But there was another solution: they would simply knock on Sepe's front door and ask him for shelter.

It was a stunt you would only pull if you worked for the Bureau, which was far and away the most arrogant and stuck-up of all the squads.

The wooden knocker banged two or three times, and an incredulous Sepe opened the door. It was the federals. What was happening now? What could they possibly want? He knew they weren't coming to arrest him. They could have run him in anytime they wanted to back in Queens, but

apparently they didn’t have an ounce of hard evidence on him yet. They had no warrants, no nothing. So what was going on?

It probably never occurred to Sepe that the wimpish FBI agents had simply gotten cold, and that they didn’t like being cold.

“Just because you come from the school of hard knocks,” the federal agent greeted him, “doesn’t mean you can’t invite a couple of us in from the weather for a cup of coffee or something. We’ve got our jobs to do, you know. We’re not out here bothering you for our health or because we like it. We’re paid to do it. But we’re not going to go away, either. And it might be easier on you—and it certainly wouldn’t kill you—if you just asked us to come in for a little while.”

“You must be kidding!” Sepe began, staring in disbelief at the FBI man.

No, it was obvious that this FBI man was not kidding. So Sepe unleashed a tremendous stream of invective at him, in two languages, and concluded by slamming the door in his face.

“You must be kidding.”

Once, a long time ago, in a different town, a man named Jazz Maffie had said the very same thing. But the Bureau never kids.

The comedy played out by those Keystone Kops in front of Sepe’s picture windows that chill winter evening was really not so funny. All that law. All those bluecoats. All that money and time and effort. And what was it all for? What was the upshot of the whole thing?

That a graduate of the school of hard knocks named John Angelo Sepe went back to his dining room table, only to find that the chicken cacciatore was already cold, and the Valpolicella was already flat.

It was going to be a bitch, this pursuit.

“It’s disorganized law enforcement,” someone said at the time, “matched against organized crime.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Pursuit, Part II

(or, The Screw-Up)

The desk officer in a New York City police precinct. Other jobs may be more hazardous physically. Few others can be more hazardous to the soul. He's the one who sits all day long in the station house, fielding other people's terrors and traumas and tragedies as casually as if they were pop flies. He's the one whose daily work experience is the dazzling, the unforseeable, the awesome, even the unspeakable in human experience. He's the one who gets taken by the hand and led on a guided tour through all the circles of hell almost every time the telephone rings.

On the face of it, the job of the police desk officer is straightforward enough. He answers the calls, handles the cranks, deals with the bereaved, and dispatches the squad cars. But there is a lot more to be considered than the face of it. There is the human factor, for instance, which automatically transforms everything. For the desk man, a single night's trick in any one of the city's high-crime precincts can be like distilling an entire, 800-page Dostoevsky novel.

And then living it.

Take the grizzled old veteran desk officer who, according to police sources, worked the 113th for the NYPD on the night of December 11, 1978. By 4:30 A.M., he had already had a two-car fatal on the Belt Parkway.

He had a floater in the Baisley Pond, a burglary in Hollis, and a wife-beating in Rochdale Village. He had a liquor-store stickup in Cambria Heights, a barroom brawl in Springfield Gardens, and a stabbing in South Jamaica.

All in a night's work. And a fairly routine night, at that. It wasn't particularly slow, he knew, but it wasn't all that busy, either. You got so you expected stuff like that to happen. You got so you just sat back at your desk between calls and yawned and stretched and sipped coffee and waited for the next horror. You got so you forgot about the stark brutality of yesterday's mugging just as fast and just as readily as you forgot about the color of the socks you put on your feet yesterday.

And after a white—and it didn't take very long—you got so you hated yourself for forgetting. For, no matter how hard and insensitive you became, no matter how inured to misery you got, you still had your moments; you still had that spark which stayed miraculously alive in spite of everything, that spark somewhere in the soul which allowed you to feel. And you still had your bad nights.

The grizzled old veteran desk officer who worked the 113 Precinct on the night of the heist may have been having one of his bad nights. Anything could have caused it. Maybe it was the particularly poignant sufferings of one of the victims. Maybe it was the particularly pointless inhumanity of one of the perpetrators. Or perhaps it was only that he was tired and wanted to go home. In any case, by 4:30 A.M. on December 11, he had probably had enough of the desk and the phones. More than enough. A colleague on the force who was there early that night said that you could tell that things weren't going so hot when he hung up on the lonely old lady who used to call the police a couple of times a week; her husband had just passed away and she couldn't sleep, and she needed a friendly voice on the other end of

the line to talk to. The desk officer could well have been in one of those “I don’t want to hear about your problems because I have enough of my own” moods.

That was when six guys from Queens wearing ski masks heisted $10 million and escaped into the dead of night. That was when the call came in from the Central Police Desk of the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey. The PA hated to make that call. They wanted Building 261 all for themselves. But the airport cops knew they would have to advise the NYPD sooner or later about what had happened, and they knew too that there would be hell to pay if they didn’t do it sooner. So within minutes, a PA functionary phoned the 113th and asked for the desk officer, and when the grizzled old veteran came on the line, the functionary spat it out.

“There’s been a robbery in the cargo area at JFK,” he began. “Lufthansa. It’s a big one. They pistol-whipped one of the workers—cracked his head open, the bastards—and they got away with a pile of cash and stones. Lots of ’em. Millions! They spent an hour inside that dump. Building 261. Kennedy. It’s been over only twenty minutes already. Better send over everything you’ve got right away.”

Normally, that’s exactly what the desk officer would have done, and nobody from the PA would have had to tell him to do it. But tonight wasn’t normal. Tonight the person who answered the phone may have been having one of his bad nights. Tonight, perhaps, he just didn’t want to hear of this, or of anything else. He had probably heard enough already. Too much. Somewhere between the wife-beating and the stabbing, sometime before the floater and after the two-car fatal, the man who answered the phone must have had already gotten his fill of nightmares.

The following description of the desk officer’s actions is contained in a report prepared by the NYPD’s Internal Affairs Division, the branch of the

force that looks into possible wrongdoing or negligence on the part of police officers. A copy of the report was obtained by the author.

There was silence on the line, and the PA functionary was waiting. “Hello, hello. Are you there? Are you still there? It was millions!”

“You can handle it,” came the response at last. It was the response of a very weary police officer.

“What?” cried the PA functionary. He was outraged. “But you guys are always giving us such grief every single goddamn time we hold off telling you something, anything, for more than a minute. And besides, how can you…?”

“You can handle it,” came the voice again. It was a more insistent voice this time.

The PA functionary was still unbelieving. “But—”

“We take care of the bombs, bodies, sex cases, and triple ax murders,” snapped the grizzled old veteran. “You can have the rest.”

Then he flung down the phone with such violence that he nearly cracked the cradle.

That outburst of temper would prove tremendously important in charting the course the heist probe would follow. Odd as it must seem, there is no way you can exaggerate the importance of that incident in terms of everything that came next. If it had not been for the fact that the all-too-human police officer at the 113th was having one of his bad nights, the entire history of the pursuit of the Lufthansa Six could well have been different.

After abruptly concluding that brusque conversation with the PA functionary, the police officer got on the horn and contacted a prowl car that was cruising down Farmers Boulevard. He instructed the two rookie cops inside to change course and head for the airport. But that was all he did. He

didn’t divert any of the thirty-seven other RMPs (radio motor patrols) that were out circulating through the 113th at that very moment. He didn’t inform his captain, his executive officer, or any other superiors. He didn’t call downtown to apprise headquarters. He didn’t brief the Detective Bureau’s Major Case Squad. All he did was send a couple of greenhorns in blind to cope as best they could with the biggest case that this town has ever seen.

In the author’s view, based on documentary evidence, interviews with NYPD brass, and his own independent investigation, the desk officer’s actions were questionable inasmuch as very little action was taken immediately, and what was done didn’t measure up to what should have been done.

In contrast, the FBI responded immediately to the Port Authority call. No sooner had the PA functionary finished talking than government agents by the dozen emerged from their offices all over town and descended on Building 261. They came in waves, and they kept coming all night long. They came from the Bureau’s airport office, its Queens office, its Manhattan headquarters. They came because they smelled a big one. And the first thing they did when they got there was shoulder aside the pair of rookies in grays from the 113th.

“Why don’t you boys run along and bust a couple of hookers or something,” said one of the G-men on the scene. “And let the really big boys take care of this one.”

It was not long after the first pallid hues of dawn appeared in the airport sky that the federals, the PA cops, and the media learned of the approximate scope of the robbery. But for an embarrassingly long period of time afterwards, the NYPD brass hadn’t an inkling of what had happened. For more than two hours, they would remain blissfully ignorant of the drama. It

got light above the tarmac and the hangars of southern Queens, but New York's Finest stayed in the dark for a long while longer.

(Such was the confusion in the early hours after the robbery that City Chief of Detectives James T. Sullivan received his first word of the big heist in a phone call to his Douglaston home from a television station at around 8:00 A.M. Such was the extent of the screw-up that Lieutenant Thomas F. Ahearn, squad commander at the 113th, heard about the crime in a radio newscast while he was out Christmas shopping for his children later that morning, at around 9:30 A.M.)

So serious was this communications mixup within the department that the city police were effectively frozen out of the first twenty-four hours of the probe. So crucial and far-reaching was this first investigative phase that the NYPD, because it was locked out of it, would fall hopelessly behind the FBI in the race that was the chase. And all because the desk officer at the 113th had probably had one of his bad nights.

Huff as they would huff, and puff as they would puff, the local bulls would never catch up.

By the time the first city police reinforcements finally started arriving at Kennedy, it was already too late. The damage had been done. The FBI had bolted ahead to a lead it would never relinquish. All the witnesses had already been interviewed separately and at length by the Bureau and the PA. The Lufthansa employees had told the story of the holdup over and over again. They had provided solid information about the way the gunmen walked and talked. They had given physical descriptions that would later be used to draw up composite portraits. They had talked and talked and talked some more, and by the time the NYPD finally swarmed in en masse, they had talked themselves out. The local bluecoats were Johnny-come-latelies in this show. The juiciest stuff had hours ago been squeezed out by others;

accordingly, they had to settle for inferior interviews with the witnesses, sketchy descriptions of the perps, fragmentary reminiscences of the action.

There was only one other way around this log jam. The NYPD could always ask its old antagonist, the FBI, to share with it the fruits of its interviews, or even, God forbid, to provide it with the transcripts of those interviews. But it was thumbs-down on that one. To do that would be like the CIA asking the KGB to kindly furnish it with the names, addresses, home phone numbers, and personnel files of all of its operatives. It was out of the question.

Later that day, another NYPD personality would play his hand, as earlier that day the veteran desk officer at the 113th had played his. Detective boss James T. Sullivan had got his Irish up. He was furious about the failure of Queens police to grasp the magnitude of the crime. He was enraged that he, Sullivan, the number-three man in the department, had learned of the heist not from an underling, but from a television reporter. And he was incensed that nothing had been done beyond sending in a couple of rookie recruits who'd barely begun to grow hair on their faces. Sending those two babes-in-the-woods into the Lufthansa blockhouse, Sullivan felt, was a gesture akin to ordering a buck private to coordinate D-Day.

What came next has appeared in published accounts in the local newspapers, and has also been confirmed by separate sources on the force.

Sullivan's first move in the matter of Building 261 was doubtless born of his anger, and instead of trying to catch up with the federals, he wound up compounding the problem so much so that the NYPD fell even further behind. He ordered Queens detectives to handle the case by themselves, without any help from the crack citywide detectives directly under his command. And without the well-oiled machinery of the elite Detective

Bureau behind them, as Sullivan well knew, the Queens plainclothes squads were as helpless as fish floundering out of water.

"With that order," wrote a *Newsday* reporter about this latest twist, "issued in a moment of pique, Sullivan was, in effect, cutting off his nose to spite his face—downplaying the importance of the case within the detective department to make a point."

It was a strange point to make. While Sullivan would end up countermanding his own order within a fortnight, the very fact that he had issued it wrought havoc with his agency's probe. It guaranteed that the first two weeks of NYPD footwork were a washout. It meant that the long arm of the law would reach out and grasp nothing. And it meant that the FBI would surge forward once again, in the race that was the chase.

"We could never have gotten so far ahead," asserts a government man, "if it hadn't been for the help of a couple of crackpot, screw-up, nut-case kooks on the force."

Not a very fair indictment, to be sure—but close enough, under the circumstances. It can be argued that the pattern of the probe was set in motion because of the discombobulated psychological state in which two city cops found themselves on the morning of December 11, 1978. It can be argued, too, that the Lufthansa investigation became an FBI-dominated investigation simply because a detective boss named James T. Sullivan had got his Irish up, and because a grizzled old veteran desk officer had had one of his bad nights, and was reduced to sounding off irrelevantly about bombs, bodies, sex cases, and triple ax murders. The momentary moodiness of that police officer—and his seen-it-all heard-it-all, sick-of-it-all attitude—might do more to undermine the entire investigation than would any other single factor over the next year and a half.

For the tired, world-weary voice of that police officer had reportedly come crackling over the airwaves of the 113th. “Squad car 40658,” the voice had said. “Squad car 40658. Proceed to JFK Building 261. Proceed to JFK Building 261. Someone handcuffed all the workers and stole a lot of money. It’s just another job, boys; just another job. Another day, another dollar…”

Perhaps, for the desk officer, that was true. But for the FBI, at least, it was certainly not just another day. Not by a long shot. And for the Lufthansa Six, it was certainly not just another dollar. Not by a long shot. It was another *ten million* dollars.

There was one other crucial reason why the federals were able to leap so effortlessly to the forefront in the race that was the chase. In a code language called “federalese,” that reason was known as “W-16-j.”

It wasn’t just because the NYPD had gone to such lengths to sabotage its own case in the early stages of the investigation. It also had something to do with a canary the Bureau would always refer to as “confidential informant W-16-j, known to be reliable in the past.”

W-16-j. There was a riddle making the rounds of the hush-hush FBI offices in this period. “What does it take to crack open the matter of Building 261 like a nutshell?” was the question.

“A canary that crows like a lady in the winter,” was the answer.

W-16-j. That riddle was typical of the FBI’s way of looking at things. It was vaguely poetic, yes, but all the images were wrong. Canaries don’t crow; they sing or they chirp. And now a lady canary had started to chirp.

W-16-j. Which side of the law would she play for a sucker this time? To the tune of whose cash register bells would she dance? And how much

would it have to ring up?

W-16-j. The “mystery woman” of Lufthansa had made her appearance. The “brunette bombshell and adventuress” had come forward at last. Out of the bluster of the wind and the snowy squall that was Queens Boulevard one December afternoon, she had walked straight as a ramrod into the well-appointed FBI office, approached the receptionist, and demanded to speak with a certain special agent in charge.

“Who may I say is calling?” said the receptionist.

“You may say that W-16-j is calling,” said the woman.

With that, she was immediately ushered into an inner sanctum office, where the special agent in charge sat gaping at his desk. And even before he had a chance to rise to his feet, to offer her a cigarette and a seat, she had already begun to sing.

“I have a story to tell you about Kennedy Airport,” said the woman known as confidential informant W-16-j. “A long, long story about a big, big night at Kennedy Airport.”

From the big picture frame on the mahogany wall behind her, the rigid bulldog face surveyed the scene. The familiar jowls, the double chin, and the unsmiling, watchful eyes of J. Edgar Hoover seemed as impassive as ever.

A canary named Terry Ferrara had just come in from the cold. A canary named Terry Ferrara had just begun to chirp the first few bars of her last song.

“I have a story to tell about Kennedy Airport.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Pursuit, Part III

(or, The Fingerprint and the Graveyard)

For a while, in the middle of December, it looked as though the pursuit would begin and end with the hounding of a couple of senile old criminal has-beens, an arthritic lockpicker named Jazz Maffie and a half-deaf safecracker named Sandy Richardson. Two specialists in Brinksmanship. But the law had other targets in mind as well. There was, for instance, the meter maid whose beat was Brownsville.

The following tales of apparent police fumbling were pieced together after a series of interviews with sources from, and spokesmen for, all four squads involved in the comedy, including several of the principals.

The first task of the harried crime-fighters in this period was the recovery of the getaway vehicle. Their hope, of course, was that it would contain key clues that would point them in the right direction. Finding the wheels should have been a cinch. Stacks had inadvertently made that much easy for them, dumping the van as he had on a street in Brooklyn instead of feeding it into a compactor in Jersey. But again, no luck. If the law had been able to present any kind of unified front at all, they might have come up with that van while Stacks was still out having his fateful, and ultimately fatal, rendezvous with the Kahlua bottle in the all-night, all-black social club in Brownsville. But that was the one thing they could never do. Never

for one moment during the course of the probe were they able to present a unified front about anything. It was the plague of the probe.

It was perhaps inevitable, then, that each of the squads would go after that van by themselves. It was perhaps inevitable that each of them would try to run it down alone, as if whoever found it first would be awarded ten points and have his name circled in blue chalk on the grade school blackboard. Not only would they not divide up the territory, so that fewer people could search a wider area, but they actually wound up traveling in convoys sometimes. There were several of those madcap motorcades in which a man from the state police trailed a man from the Port Authority, who in turn was trailing a man from the NYPD, who in turn was trailing a man from the FBI. This cumbersome, four-car procession would check out every single block in the hunt for the wheels, though, naturally, only a single car was required. The extra vehicles were there solely for the lawmen to keep tabs on one another, and it is very likely indeed that all four of them drove obliviously past the van they were supposed to be looking for, so intent were they on eyeing each other suspiciously in their rearview mirrors. So unwilling were these bluecoats to cooperate with one another, so fearful were they that whoever found the van first would keep the silly thing for himself, that it is a wonder they ever found it at all.

But find it they did. By accident.

Stacks had conveniently parked the black 1978 Ford Econoline van of the 150 series, New York State license plate number 508-HWM, just seven miles away from the scene of the crime. And there it sat, for nearly seventy-two hours. Three days and six parking tickets later, something suddenly jelled for a traffic cop on a routine patrol. He recognized the illegally parked vehicle as the same one used in the heist, the vehicle that had caused more of a to-do than anything astride four wheels since the first Model T

rolled off the first assembly line in Detroit. This was the vehicle that hundreds of lawmen had been desperately fighting each other to get to first. This was the vehicle that had wound up in the rubble-strewn slums of Brownsville, on East 95th Street between Church Avenue and Linden Boulevard. Because the traffic cop had spotted it first, it meant that the NYPD had won this particular race. The van was theirs. But for the force, the glory was to be remarkably short-lived.

The media caught wind of the discovery, and soon the *Post* and the *News* were running the usual "First Big Break" headlines. That was all it took for the FBI and the other squads to come running. The lawmen clamored around that van, as the neighborhood people of Brownsville stuck their heads out of the tenement windows and their kids playing ball in the littered lots came running, and they all wondered what on earth was going on.

What was going on was this: the NYPD was dusting the van for fingerprints; the FBI was dusting the van for fingerprints; the PA was dusting the van for fingerprints; and the NYSPD was dusting the van for fingerprints.

It never occurred to any of them that one crackerjack dusting would have done the trick just as well. Or perhaps even better.

Since the state troopers were the last to join the parade, the only fingerprints they found belonged to the Port Authority's forensic team. Since the PA had also arrived after the starting bell rang, the only imprints they found were the distinctive palm prints left by the G-men. But for once, the NYPD and the FBI had better luck, and they each struck pay dirt at last. A partial index fingerprint was lifted from the van's mudguard.

Those minute concentric swirls, those telltale loops and arches and whorls, must have read like poetry to the clue-starved investigators. Those

papillary ridges, those sweat-and-urea-stained lineations, contained within them the key that would unlock all the mysteries of the Lufthansa caper. The investigators knew that whoever had made that print had gone into Building 261 wearing a ski mask and brandishing a gun. They knew that whoever had made that print had left Building 261 and vanished into the black of the night, richer by the tidy sum of $10 million. They knew, too, that all they had to do to crack the case wide open was find the finger that had made that fingerprint.

Again, there was a surge of optimism, and again, a spate of “First Big Break” headlines splashed in Gothic caps across page one of the tabloids.

The NYPD made the identification of that print its number-one priority. The FBI made the identification of that print its number-one priority. Again, there was never even a thought of joining forces and sharing files. Again, the race was on. The federals worked that print in New York and at its central criminal laboratory in Washington, D.C. The locals worked that print in the five boroughs. Both agencies worked that print in Saint-Cloud, France, through Interpol. And neither agency would talk to the other.

The city cops looked up the owners of some 250 cars given parking tickets in Brownsville on the night of the heist, on the theory that one of them might have dropped off the van there and then transferred into an illegally parked and ticketed car. It was a ploy that had paid off in the Son of Sam mass-murder case, and maybe it would work again. It didn’t. The bulls knocked on some 250 doors and asked some 250 parking violators if they’d mind being fingerprinted, but none of their prints matched the swirls lifted from the getaway vehicle. There was one unexpected premium from all this effort, however. The fingerprints of one of those scofflaws turned out to match those of a man wanted in Connecticut on a check-forging rap. Sad to say, his unceremonious arrest at the hands of the NYPD proved the

only setback to the forces of crime to come out of this early phase of the Lufthansa investigation.

Meanwhile, as the city coppers were pulling their hair out trying to run down that wild-card print, the feds were also at their wits' end because of it. A painstaking hunt through the fingerprint files of hundreds of thousands of known felons had turned up nothing. A search through the two-million-plus other fingerprints the FBI liked to stockpile in its non-criminal file—"just in case"—was also to no avail. Since the print lifted from the van was only a partial print, the feds finally took to matching it with a whole class of other prints that only partially resembled it. This dredging of the files gave the Bureau two possible suspects. But unfortunately, both of them were found to have airtight alibis. The first unexpected Lufthansa suspect was a child molester and rapist of ten-year-olds who had spent the night of December 11, 1978 in the state of California, with a nice view of the bay from his room in a place called San Quentin. And the second surprise Lufthansa suspect was a known Communist, a card-carrying member of the party from Massachusetts, who, as it turned out, had been dead for eighteen years.

Neither of these men was very likely to have barged into Building 261 to play bandit. Neither of them was very likely to have left his mark on that van in the slummiest slums of Brownsville, Brooklyn.

This fingerprint farce could well have gone on indefinitely, but finally some genius on the force decided that the time had come to take the "elimination prints" on the theory that somebody other than a Lufthansa bandit could have left those swirls behind.

(Elimination prints—or "elims," as they're called in the trade—are the fingerprint samples that the police routinely request of innocent people whose paths just happen to cross the paths of criminals at crime scenes. The reason for taking these extra prints is obvious—if fingerprints are found in

an incriminating position where a crook could well have left them, on the getaway van for example, it still doesn't necessarily mean that those fingerprints were left by that crook. It's just as likely that a law-abiding citizen left those prints in the exact spot where the crook could have been expected to leave them, but didn't. So the idea is to find that law-abiding citizen, or at least find out if he exists. Chances are, he'll be easier to find than the crook. To avoid wasting time, most sensible investigators will first determine whether it was an innocent who left the fingerprints, or whether it was the crook, or if it was more than one print, whether it was both. This eliminates the headaches involved in chasing a phantom crook based on fingerprints that aren't even his.

It's elementary law enforcement. Say a bunch of Puerto Rican FALN terrorists blow up a branch of the Chase Manhattan Bank. They leave a note in a nearby phone booth claiming responsibility for the deed and promising to overthrow "Yanqui imperialism" in the very near future. A man goes into the phone booth, finds the note, and hands it over to the authorities. There are probably two sets of fingerprints on that note: the set left by the terrorists, and the set left by the man who found the note. So the police take elimination prints. They fingerprint the man who found the note, allowing them to concentrate their hunt on the man who left it.)

Common sense dictates that the elimination prints be taken at the very outset of an investigation. But nonsense seemed to dictate everything that these bumbling Keystone Kops managed to pull in the Lufthansa investigation.

The $10 Million Getaway took place on December 11. The getaway vehicle was found on December 14, and with it, the crucial fingerprint. That was the time to take the elims. But top investigative sources say it didn't happen that way; it wasn't until December 18 that anyone bothered to take

any elimination prints at all. And it wasn't until December 20, according to an NYPD source who was there when it happened, that the lawmen learned whose fingerprints it was that they had dedicated the most critical phase of the probe to running down.

After banging their heads against the proverbial wall for days, the city cops finally returned to Brownsville, the down-at-the-heels neighborhood where the van had been found. They took elims of scores of area residents who might have touched that van. They took elims of the postman, the garbageman, the telephone repairman, the cockroach exterminator, and the Con Ed meter-reader. They even took elims of the convicted car thief who lived a block or two away, on the theory that he might have left his fingerprint on the van while trying to steal it. No luck.

Finally, someone had a brainstorm, and the NYPD's forensic squad paid a visit to the meter maid whose beat was Brownsville. She was the one who had stepped off her motor scooter to place at least three of the six twenty-five-dollar summonses under the van's windshield wipers.

And she was the one, as it turned out, who had briefly and fatefully placed her middle index finger on the mudguard of the vehicle, thus touching off another absurd comedy in the race that was the chase.

That fingerprint episode burned up nine key days of investigative work. All for nothing. And in the meantime, the mob had ample time to cover up its tracks and squirrel away every single dollar of the loot. As the law went running around like a chicken with its head cut off, devoting its best efforts to chasing a meter maid, the Robert's Lounge Gang sprang into action, according to underworld informants. It was in this period that someone with a set of keys came into Stacks' apartment as he slept and put six bullets into his chest and head. It was in this period that the money was pulled out from under the floorboards of Jimmy the Gent's Howard Beach home and

transferred to safer quarters. It was in this period that a hood named John Angelo Sepe made a trip down to Florida to deposit a huge pile of U.S. greenbacks on the front door stoop of a *capo* named Paul Vario, Sr. It was in this period, too, that a Godfather named Antonio (Tony Ducks) Corallo started laundering deutsche marks, and deciding who would live and who would die.

And it was in this period that a hired killer named Flatlands Tony received the immutable sentences of doom, and began to stalk his victims.

None of it should have happened.

And it's probable that none of it would have happened if the lawmen hadn't been so hell-bent on chasing a phantom crook based on fingerprints that weren't even his. But they got excited about having found the fingerprints of their quarry that they never even bothered to make sure it really was their quarry. And of course it wasn't. It was just a passerby who had happened to leave her mark at the scene of the crime. Said police, it was just a meter maid whose beat was Brownsville.

The press in New York has always been fickle. Overnight, the "First Big Break" became the "Fingerprint Farce."

And what a farce it was! It began when a woman stepped off a motor scooter to ticket a black 1978 Ford van. It surged forward when the lawmen found the middle index fingerprint of a supposed Lufthansa bandit on that van, which gave them the ammunition they needed to bust the case wide open. It endured when the FBI, in a throwback to its Red-baiting days, came briefly to suspect a card-carrying Communist who had been dead for eighteen years. It peaked when the NYPD arrested a man wanted in Connecticut on a check-forging rap. And it ended without fanfare when the crime-fighters finally learned that the telltale fingerprint wasn't so telltale

after all—that those arches, loops, whorls, and swirls had been made by none other than the meter maid whose beat was Brownsville.

In the midst of all this law enforcement tomfoolery, the Lufthansa Six had a fine opportunity to make tracks. The bad guys had already made good their getaway. But now they had the leisure time to make that getaway even more impossible to follow. Which, of course, they promptly did.

And it was all because a meter maid had touched a mudguard.

The investigation into the matter of Building 261 might have ground to a halt at this point. It was moribund, breathing its last breath. But it was to rise from its deathbed in spectacular fashion that very afternoon, at least for the feds. For something had just happened that the G-men would go to remarkable lengths to keep under wraps. Something about a canary that crowed like a lady in the winter.

It was "confidential informant W-16-j, known to be reliable in the past." On December 20, the very day that the fingerprint farce had resolved itself, she had come in from the cold. On December 20, the very day that the investigation appeared doomed, she had begun to chirp the first few bars of her last song. On December 20, the very day that the meter maid whose beat was Brownsville became just another footnote in the Lufthansa story, she had begun to tell the true story, the story that would go on and on and on and on, the story that would only end when it led her to a watery grave.

"I have a story to tell about Kennedy Airport," said Terry Ferrara.

And the unsmiling, watchful eyes of J. Edgar Hoover stared blankly down at her.

On December 21, Lee Laster, the FBI special agent in charge of Brooklyn, Queens, and Long Island, summoned the representatives of all the other

squads to his office in the Rego Park section of Queens. This office, at 95-25 Queens Boulevard, had become the command center for the Lufthansa probe, and it was here that Terry Ferrara had made her dramatic appearance just twenty-four hours earlier. It was here that as many as 135 crewcut federals sat hunched over their desks and worked round-the-clock to recover the Red Baron's money. And it was here, smack-dab on the main street of the borough of Queens, within a government citadel that was off limits to almost everyone, that justice of a sort—a very strange sort—would finally be meted out.

As columnist Jimmy Breslin would write about this place, and about the high stakes you played for if you worked here: "There are so many FBI agents in on the case, all operating out of an office building on Queens Boulevard, that if they fail to solve the Lufthansa case, the agents truly will know what the rest of us in Queens learned a long time ago: the street is the original boulevard of broken dreams."

The agents would learn that unpleasant truth soon enough. A whole generation of G-men working out of that Queens command post would cut their teeth on that case, only to find out that their teeth weren't sharp enough by a long shot. Before it ran its course, the Lufthansa probe would result in a lot of promotions and firings (mostly firings); it would make or wreck scores of law enforcement careers (mostly wreck them); and above all, it would break an untold number of dreams, for the law and the mob alike.

Queens was good at breaking dreams.

But all that was light-years away on December 21, the day Lee Laster, the regional FBI boss, mustered the top guns from the rival agencies in his Queens Boulevard retreat. The top guns all groaned when they got the call from Laster. They had gone through this charade before. Chances were it

was going to be another “briefing.” They were jokes, these briefings. You sat around for a couple of hours talking about the weather, and when it was over, the press releases were whisked off boasting of another successful “joint conference and strategy session.” It was all just for show. Justice by press release. The whole thing was a sham, like so many of the bureau’s best crime-fighting techniques. Laster had arranged several of these affairs over the past few days. The point was to counteract the stories appearing in the press, which suggested that the good guys were going through merry hell trying to solve the Lufthansa case only because they wound up spending as much time shouldering each other aside as they did trying to solve the case itself. It was true, of course. And the briefings, which were designed to prove that it wasn’t true, only proved all the more strikingly that it was.

But this briefing was going to be different, Laster insisted. He was going to lay down the ground rules. He was going to make it possible for the squads to work together effectively at last. And so, in the guise of fostering cooperation, Laster launched the FBI coup that would make cooperation even more impossible to achieve, the coup that would give the FBI the decisive edge in the race that was the chase.

One of the author’s law enforcement sources was present in the room on that December afternoon when Laster outlined his plan for the benefit of the other squads, and he has furnished this account. It was certainly simple enough. To spur the probe and prevent duplication, each agency from that moment on was to share the fruits of its interviews, as well as the other investigative intelligence it gathered, with each of the other agencies. There were just two exceptions to this plan, and therein lay its crux: each agency would keep the names of its informants secret from the other agencies, and

each agency would also follow up on the leads it received from those informants without telling the others.

Those were the ground rules. Local officials say they understood at the time why the names of the informants had to be kept confidential. (That was to protect the informants, and it was part of the compact the law entered into with them in getting them to come forward in the first place.) But what they couldn't figure out was the reason behind the second exception. What really had them wondering was why the information on the leads supplied by those tipsters would also be withheld. As long as the source itself was shielded, what difference did it make if the leads that source came up with were shared with the other law enforcement agencies? That was the puzzling part.

That was the trick.

What the local cops didn't learn for nearly two months was that the FBI and special agent Lee Laster had set the rules only hours after the Queens Boulevard office had received a crucial tip from a very special informant. What they didn't learn until it was way too late was that that informant had already provided the feds with a solid notion of the underworld powers behind the robbery, as well as hinting at the names of the men who were the actual robbers. What they didn't learn was of the existence of "confidential informant W-16-j, known to be reliable in the past." What they didn't learn on December 21, in that "joint conference and strategy session," was that only the day before, a canary named Terry Ferrara had come in from the cold and begun to sing her last song. They learned all that the hard way, and according to the stories leaked by the NYPD, the Queens DA's office, and the Port Authority cops, the FBI had intentionally misled them.

From the day of the briefing until February 17, the day G-men made the first two arrests in the Lufthansa case, the FBI did not disclose that

information to the other squads. It was only after the arrests, which were made on the strength of Ferrara's intelligence, that the tips she provided began to emerge. And even then, the local squads were never told directly of the clues they needed to mount an investigation that would be something other than a joke. They only found out through selective leaks from the Bureau to the press. They only found out, they say, by reading the newspapers.

By then, Terry Ferrara had already vanished from her Long Island hairdressing parlor. By then, Terry Ferrara had already gone on her last ride. By then, Terry Ferrara had already kept her fatal rendezvous with the Atlantic Ocean.

There probably wouldn't have been such resentment on the part of the local law enforcement officials if the Bureau had announced from the outset that it was keeping everything to itself. But instead, it apparently went through an elaborate charade, selling the idea of cooperation to the other squads when, really, it had the complete opposite in mind. And as a result, the local law, which fell for it, logged hours and hours of needless work.

In the race that was the chase, the FBI's no-holds-barred scheme won in a commanding lead over its arch rivals—the city bulls. But if ever there was a Pyrrhic victory, this was it. The federals won the battle against the NYPD, but they lost the war against the Lufthansa Six.

As former Attorney General Ramsey Clark noted a few years back, "Many of the biggest failings of law enforcement in America in the 1960s and '70s arose from the unwillingness of the FBI to participate on an equal basis with the other crime-control agencies. The Bureau has so coveted personal credit that it will sacrifice even effective crime control before it will share the glory of its exploits. This has been a petty and costly

characteristic caused by the Bureau's self-centered concern for its own reputation."

Against this background of suspicion and mistrust, it seems remarkable that the local squads agreed to the FBI's ground rules. Perhaps they really felt that special agent Lee Laster had the blueprints that would make the probe work. Perhaps they were just tired of all the infighting. In any case, they fell for it, and they fell for it bad. The NYPD, the Port Authority, the state police, and the Queens District Attorney's office all agreed to cooperate and share their notes with each other and with the FBI. More important, and more regrettable, was the fact that they agreed to the two exceptions that Laster had so coyly insisted on.

In the last third of December, then, each of the agencies—even the FBI—kept its word, and swapped notes with each of the others. But all they were swapping were a few incidental tidbits, and the tidbits by themselves didn't amount to much. Only the FBI was able to do anything with them. Only the FBI was able to use them to increase the momentum it had already picked up when it landed W-16-j.

It is an old cliché to liken the solving of a mystery to the solving of a jigsaw puzzle. What the FBI was giving out to the other squads in this period were a few stray pieces of the Lufthansa puzzle that by themselves made little or no sense. What the FBI was holding onto, however, was the master pattern for that puzzle, and as every kid who ever did a jigsaw puzzle will tell you, you can't solve the puzzle unless you have the pattern. What the FBI was getting from the other squads in return for its "cooperation" in this period were a few stray pieces of that same puzzle. But the Bureau alone had the master pattern, and that made all the difference. To the feds, those pieces made a bit more sense. The master

pattern, of course, was the overall picture of the crime supplied by Terry Ferrara.

It was a neat trick. The government men could cultivate Ferrara, develop her fully as an informant, and keep everything they learned to themselves. But the local law, on the other hand, had no one to cultivate, nobody to develop, nothing to do but your basic nuts-and-bolts detective work, and everything they learned they had to share with the feds. The feds, in short, had tricked the city boys into doing their homework for them.

Nuts-and-bolts detective work—that was what it all came down to for the locals. In the last days of December and through the middle of January, they beat the bushes as never before. Take the NYPD; the precision, predawn plundering spree of Building 261 left several questions unanswered for them:

How did the thieves manage to pick such a bonanza night for the theft? How did they know to bring handcuffs for every employee? How did they reconnoiter the hangar and its sensitive security system? And—the biggest question of all—who were they, and where did they go with the money?

The FBI already had the answers to those questions, or most of them. One by one, a lady canary had supplied them, and the Bureau was guarding them as jealously as if they were the crown jewels. But the NYPD had nothing, and had no way of finding out, except through the oldest and most time-consuming method in the book.

Nuts-and-bolts detective work.

For New York’s Finest, the phrase meant the slow and painstaking hunt for clues in the most unlikely of quarters. It meant scores of unproductive interviews and long, tense hours with shady characters, the type whose mug shots are found most often on post office walls. It meant fruitless searches for bodies and cash from one end of the Naked City to the other. It meant

spot raids on black markets and pawnshops in pursuit of the hot stones. It meant sifting through hundreds of tips from people motivated more by the promise of easy reward money than by the desire for justice. And it meant reading between the thinly spaced lines of the classified sections in the daily newspapers, in hopes of intercepting and deciphering the messages that mobsters periodically sent to each other at $5.40 a line.

One such advertisement seemed particularly promising to the hard-pressed city investigators. It was one of those three-liners printed in agate type at the bottom of the fourth news column on page one of the *Times*. The ad read:

> FOR THOSE FAVORING CREMATION, WOODLAWN
> Cemetery offers a free pamphlet giving complete information.
> Call 212-652-2100—Advt.

Thorough readers of the *Times* will be familiar with that perfectly innocuous ad. It has appeared on page one for as long as the paper has accepted ads on page one, and as long as Woodlawn Cemetery has been cremating the dead.

But the city bulls got excited when they espied that little ad. To them, it wasn’t so innocuous. Their instincts told them it had something to do with the Lufthansa heist, even though they had absolutely no idea what. They were desperate for clues, any clues, so desperate that they had already reached the stage where they were starting to see clues under their beds. Besides, there was a dangerous new report sprinting through the streets in this period, which gave their theory some credence and made all references to cemeteries suspect, even if they appeared in *The New York Times*. Flatlands Tony was back. There was one man dead already. Rumors of new hits were everywhere. And the mob bloodbath was about to begin.

So, for all the city cops knew, that harmless, agate advertisement could indeed have been a veiled message between killers about the next manmade corpse, possibly a roast job. In any event, the NYPD sent a man up to the Woodlawn burial grounds at the top of the Bronx to interview the curator of the cemetery. And sure enough, it turned out that the ad that had caused all the fuss was nothing more than what it appeared to be: a pitch for the sanitary, much-vaunted crematoriums of Woodlawn Cemetery.

Nuts and bolts. The slow pursuit of the routine. The endless, unavoidable drudgery of the investigation. The least glamorous part of the job. But if you had nothing else to go on, what else could you do? And the NYPD had nothing else to go on.

The police probe was headquartered at the 113th Precinct station house, 167-02 Baisley Boulevard, in the Springfield Gardens section of Queens, just two and a half miles away from JFK. Here, one of the main weapons against crime was a computer known affectionately as “Fat Nellie.” Fat Nellie was the precinct’s Field Administrative Terminal Network, and she worked a lot of overtime on the Lufthansa case. Whenever anyone dug up the name of a possible suspect, he would feed it into Fat Nellie. Fat Nellie would take that name, digest it, and then spew out a lot of information about the suspect’s address, license plate number, age, description, and criminal past.

“Throw it in the hopper,” a detective would shout out as soon as the name of a possible suspect was unearthed, “and see what comes out.”

But even Fat Nellie was of very little help this time.

One of the many problems plaguing the cops in these frustrating days was what has come to be known around the squad rooms as the “jilted girlfriend syndrome.” Whenever a murder took place, whenever a big crime was afoot, whenever anything felonious came down that generated a lot of

press, the former girlfriends and ex-wives would invariably come crawling out of the woodwork, call the police, and announce predictably, “My husband or ‘my boyfriend’ did it.”

You could set your watch by it. Thirty minutes after the commission of the crime, the police switchboards would be flooded and dozens of women would be blaming the deed on their departed lovers and spouses. In the matter of Building 261, it was hundreds of women. All those calls had to be checked out, and so an undertaker, a building superintendent, a racetrack steward, and a mechanic who fueled wide-body jets, among others, became the latest to join the ever-growing roster of suspected Lufthansa bandits.

The real bandits, of course, walked tall on the streets, and whenever one of them, a man named Jimmy the Gent, swaggered into a gin mill in the south of Queens, someone would always bellow out the old greeting: “Let’s have a drink on Lufthansa!”

There were other things weighing down the NYPD probe: the eccentrics who wanted to confess; the folks who bolted their doors when the investigators knocked; the cranks who claimed they had inside information, information that investigative work would later prove to be fantasy.

But no matter how dubious it sounded, all of it had to be run down.

Whenever the NYPD gold shields thought they had turned up the name of one of the Lufthansa bandits, the first thing they did was send that name through Fat Nellie. Fat Nellie usually eliminated the candidate. But if not, the next step was to check with the Central Records Division’s Identification Section for the suspect’s B-number. (The B-number is the one the thug wears around his neck on a cardboard signboard when he poses for his mug shot.) Then the bulls would gather his photos, his criminal record, his fingerprints, and the names of his associates. Then they’d check with the Organized Crime Control Bureau to see if it had a special file on him. And

finally, they'd pay him a call and ask what he was doing on the night of the job.

Just checking him out.

Fifty times and more, they went through this routine. Fifty times and more, nothing came of it. And fifty times and more, they turned their notes over to the federals. For the federals, something came of it.

One of the many other reasons the local boys had so much trouble in these days was that the NYPD was hopelessly riven with factions. The Lufthansa inquiry, of course, had already brought the long-simmering tensions among the different agencies of the law to a fast boil. But within those individual agencies there were deep-running tensions, too. There was, in fact, chaos within the ranks. The Queens cops resented the intervention of the citywide cops, who, they claimed, stayed magisterially aloof most of the time, only to show up and horn in whenever there was a big one. So the linemen of the 113th squared off with the downtown brass of the Major Case Squad. And the borough boys of the Queens Detective Task Force squared off with the downtown big shots of the parent Detective Bureau. (Later, the FBI would face this same internal problem. The agents at the Bureau's main New York headquarters—26 Federal Plaza in Manhattan—at its Queens Boulevard command center, and at its small airport office would collide repeatedly, as each fought tooth and nail with the other for supremacy in the probe.)

The twenties of December and the teens of January.

It was a wild time in the south of Queens. There were so many NYPD bluecoats fanning out through the neighborhoods that the tree-lined streets of Springfield Gardens seemed to change their colors that winter from sullen black and drab gray to the most azure of blues. The invasion was such that the candy stores of Howard Beach looked more like squad rooms.

The gin mills of Ozone Park looked more like interview rooms. And the hangars of Kennedy Airport looked more like criminology classrooms at the Police Academy.

There were 17,847 policemen and policewomen on the force of New York's Finest. The odds were clearly in their favor, almost three thousand-to-one, for they were after a grand total of six bandits. But when it came to the Robert's Lounge Gang, the mathematics were shot to hell. And when it came to an out-and-out case of FBI sabotage, all bets were off. The NYPD finished out of the money in the race that was the chase, and it went down hard.

Nuts-and-bolts detective work. That was just about all the bulls had left. And all the while, the G-men sat rapt as a canary whose code name was W-16-j chirped and chirped and chirped some more.

Nuts-and-bolts detective work. For the bulls, that meant one jinx after another, one bedevilment after another. And all the while, in a secrecy-cloaked office at the other end of Queens, Terry Ferrara spun her last yarn.

Nuts-and-bolts detective work. What was the use? As it was, the flatfoots of the NYPD were virtually impotent in the biggest series of crimes to hit New York City since the Civil War Draft Riots of 1863. There was truly nothing left for them to do. Nothing. Except perhaps to worry a little more about the kerosene-fueled burning of the corpses at a place in the Bronx called Woodlawn Cemetery.

Nuts and bolts. An unfortunate episode. But at least one thing came of it. A handy little epitaph for the entire star-crossed, booby-trapped Lufthansa investigation:

"FOR THOSE FAVORING CREMATION…"

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Pursuit, Part IV

(or, The Canary)

> "And what happens in the end?"
> "In the end? Why she dies of course in the end. What else would happen?"
>
> —Dialogue between Anton Walbrook and Marius Goring in the 1948 movie *The Red Shoes*.

They kept her in Brooklyn.

Brooklyn. *Breukelen*, as the Dutch called it a few centuries ago. Kings County. The Borough of Churches. To many from an older generation, the place is still synonymous with the Dodgers and Ebbets Field, Murder Incorporated, the Parachute Jump at Coney Island, the newspaper called *The Eagle*, the restaurant where Giuseppe (Joe the Boss) Masseria got his, and the great bridge that could be sold to suckers or jumped from by suicides.

Brooklyn. They put her in a small, secluded apartment there, in the ramshackle Bedford-Stuyvesant section. "Bed-Stuy," they called this dismal neighborhood—possibly the most foreboding black ghetto in the five boroughs. Center of a booming heroin trade. Nightly homicides in the

summertime. As impoverished as Calcutta. But all the same, as a hideout for a Caucasian informant, it was safer by far than the all-white precincts to the south and along the shore, for that was where the Italians lived. That was where Flatlands Tony would soon make a macabre point of depositing the putrefying remains of his latest victims. That was where the professional hit men plied their trade, and it was said in those parts that they saved their sloppiest work for the killing of informants. They didn't take very kindly to them. Never mind whether the target was a lady informant or not. Your average torpedo was not gallant. If the contract was out, the job would be done, and it would be done none too cleanly.

Brooklyn. They were taking no chances with her. The Italian quarters were clearly no good. The hubbub of Queens Boulevard was no good, either. Somebody would be sure to spot her in either of those places. Even the old pay-phone-to-pay-phone method was too risky. What they really needed was a place where they could sit her down and pick her brains and let her chirp into the night without fear. What they really needed was a safe house where neither the NYPD nor the mob (in that order, no doubt) would ever be able to find out that she *was* chirping.

So they spirited her away and locked her up in a seedy, slummy walk-up amid the spooks and the zombies and the hypes of Bedford-Stuyvesant. They ringed her with G-men and lookouts and a whole arsenal of Colt revolvers and Smith & Wessons and .357 Magnums, and they turned that tenement into an armed camp. Then they plopped themselves down in uncomfortable, straight-backed chairs. They looked at her fixedly, and their eyes formed a question mark. Her eyes stared back hard into theirs, without wavering, and then she nodded slowly. She was ready. They brought in the stenographer.

She was ready to talk, but for a while she would only talk in riddles. She was ready to talk, yes, but she wasn't ready to come clean. Not yet. Not until the payoff was set. Not until the price was right. And what a price it was. Until then, she would answer their questions with more questions. She could afford to keep them guessing. They needed her more than she needed them. She was playing a game where there was no turning back, a game with life-or-death stakes, and the way she figured it, the very least she could do was to pick the rules by which she played that game, since it might be the last time she played it.

"There are lots of ways to play at this game," she had once told a friend back on Long Island, reflecting on her double life. "I like to play with the house percentages."

But even the house loses sometimes.

They brought the stenographer into that hole-in-the-wall in Brooklyn, and so began the negotiations and the war of nerves between Theresa (Terry) Ferrara and the United States Federal Bureau of Investigation.

It was December 22, 1978.

The first question was an obvious one: "Who did it?"

But it took the feds fifteen more days before they got a straight answer to that question, and three days after that before they got the complete answer. In the meantime, Terry Ferrar's circumlocutory chatter filled files the thickness of *War and Peace*.

"Who did it?" they asked her again. But the transcripts show that she would not name names.

"Well," she replied, "for starters, there's this nice old man, a godfatherly type. Not so nice if you cross him, though. He's croaked more than his

share. Still, he's managed to duck convictions in all but a handful of his numerous arrests. They know his face at the Waldorf like they once knew the face of Douglas MacArthur when he lived there, and he tips even bigger. But they don't know him by his real name, of course. He doesn't want to wave no red, white, and green flag in front of his WASP friends. They know him as 'Mr. Anthony Charles.' Ask him what he does for a living, and he'll tell you that he's the vice-president of a Teamsters local. That's true, he is. And it's all he ever puts down on his taxes. But he's more than that. A lot more."

She was probably talking about Antonio (Tony Ducks) Corallo, Godfather and fixer *extraordinaire*. Corallo, in fact, did hold a prominent position in the nation's largest trade union, the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, Chauffeurs, Warehousemen, and Helpers. He'd held it ever since the early days of Dave Beck and James Riddle Hoffa. But his specialty was siphoning off cash from that union's treasury, milking its pension funds, and arranging easy loans to himself that he never had to pay back. As the McClellan Committee noted back in the late 1950s, "It cannot be said, using the widest possible amount of latitude, that Antonio Corallo was ever interested in bettering the lot of the working man."

Then there was another old man, the "honest, small-time scrap dealer." Said Ferrara: "A conversation with him begins with the question, 'What's the price of a pig iron on the Brooklyn market?,' and ends with the question, 'How about bronze-copper alloy in the Bronx?' But if you want to know the truth, he's interested in one or two other things than the price of a bunch of cheap metals on the junk-salvage markets."

She could very well have been referring to mob *capo* Paul Vario, Sr., proud owner of salvage yards. Vario used to run his kingdom from one such place, a front known vaguely as Bargain Auto Parts. There was a trailer

deep in the heart of this Canarsie junkyard—ringed by a fourteen-foot chain-link fence, topped with barbed wire, guarded night and day by vicious attack dogs and trigger-happy watchmen—and it was here that Vario looked after his interests in those "one or two other things." Back in 1971, undercover city cops posing as Christmas tree salesmen set up shop across the street and began a twenty-four-hour surveillance of the place. One year later, the fix was in. Bargain Auto Parts was raided and shut down, and Brooklyn District Attorney Eugene Gold ticked off some of those "one or two other things" he had learned about. "We have discovered," boasted Gold, "hundreds of deals involving the sale of narcotics, extortion and loan-sharking, corruption, the buying of policemen and detectives, the bribing of politicians and judges, coercion, bookmaking, policy, assault and robbery, murder, burglaries, counterfeiting, hijacking, receiving stolen property, forgery, possession and sale of weapons, labor racketeering, stolen auto rings, untaxed cigarettes, insurance frauds, arson of businesses, takeover of businesses, the cutting up of autos and boats, prostitution, and violations of the alcoholic-beverage-control laws." When Vario walked out of jail a few years later, he decided New York was too hot for him. He decided to try "semiretirement," and he moved down to Hollywood, Florida. But he took his scrap dealerships to the South with him; and he took "one or two other things" with him as well.

"The next one's a strange bird," Ferrara resumed. "The 'Committee of One,' they call him. The gentlemen of the rackets. A real promoter. He'll give you the shirt off his back if he likes you, and he'll put the slug on you if he doesn't like you, and it never takes him no more than a minute to decide which it's going to be. Drinks everything he can get his hands on, from Wild Irish Rose and Night Train Express and all the other rotguts, all the way up to Dom Perignon champagne. But he's a religious guy, too.

Crosses himself before he goes out on a job. Keeps rosary beads in the getaway car. Used to be an altar boy, and he never lets you forget it. So when Lent comes around, he gives up drinking. But he makes up for it on the night before, and what a blowout he has on the night after! Somehow though, I don't think he'll be able to put down the bottle very much this season. He's got too much to celebrate. Oh, I almost forgot to tell you. He did the whole thing from jail."

She was talking about a God-fearing Catholic and unlikely penitent named James (Jimmy the Gent) Burke. And she was right. Lent came little more than two months after the job in Building 261, and this time, Burke kept right on guzzling. For the Old Bushmill's flowed like water in the saloons of southern Queens whenever a wise guy recognized him and yawped out, "Let's have a drink on Lufthansa!" So instead of booze, Burke had to find something else to give up for the Lent of 1979. He gave up crime. He could afford to.

Then there was another religious man, though from a different faith. "This one never misses one of the Jewish holidays. Goes for the skullcap. The whole works. Not much of a *mensch*, though. He's little, by the way. Very little. And bookish too. In a way."

He was bookish all right. That was Martin (Little Marty the Bookie) Krugman that Ferrara was discussing now. And yes, he was religious, too. He never did a job between Friday evening and Saturday evening, and he would sport a gaudy yarmulke in that twenty-four-hour period. But he would take your football action just the same. "Where is it written," he used to ask, "that a bookmaker cannot lay off the Miami Dolphins on the Sabbath if he doesn't like the point spread?" Krugman had a strange way of seeking inclusion in the covenant between God and Abraham: the vigorish kept him from want.

“Next you got a character who’s also bookish, but in an entirely different sense. He’s *really* bookish, this one—super-bookish. Goes around quoting things all the time, weird things. Only problem is, no one ever knows what the hell it is that he’s talking about. But that’s never stopped him. He gives the impression, this guy, that he’d be more comfortable at a university up in the country somewhere, sitting in a professor’s chair, than out hustling for a living on the streets.”

But Richard Eaton, linguist, Notre Dame graduate, wheeler-dealer, and self-styled man of letters, would die on those mean streets. And he would die quoting Shakespeare.

“This next fellow, he’s got an Italian name with so many vowels and syllables in it that no one ever uses it, since they can’t pronounce it, or they can’t remember what it is. They just call him an initial. An initial, and the word ‘mister.’ That’s the way he wants it ’cause he takes himself seriously and he figures he deserves a lot of respect. A button man. He’s got a trademark, this one, and it goes everywhere he goes. It’s about five or six inches long, and he carries it between his lips, and you never see him without it. It’s a little piece of Cuba. Havana, to be precise.”

She was talking about Mr. Y and his precious H. Upmann.

“He’s got a record as long as your arm. The law has always been on his trail for somethin’. Hangs out in Ozone Park, where most of the robbers come from, and he also works the Island from time to time. He’s come up in the world this month, but he used to be nothing but a penny-ante obituary burglar. You know what that is? It means he reads the obits in *Newsday*, and when there’s a death in a rich family, he waits until the moment the mourners are all out at the funeral services. Then he breaks into their homes and empties the dumps. Almost as cheap as robbing the dead. No surprise, though. This guy’s always been a punk. How he ever made it into the big

time, I'll never know. But one thing's for sure—he's not going to stay there very long. No way."

That was John Angelo Sepe, a so-called obituary burglar, whom Ferrara was describing in such unflattering terms. The fourteen priors on his yellow sheet include three arrests for breaking and entering at the homes of the bereaved.

"The work-release program can be a wonderful thing for rehabilitating cons in their last few days of incarceration. It can also be a wonderful thing for cons who have something on their minds besides rehabilitation. Take this guy who was locked up in the nighttime, and let out in the daytime for a job on Seventh Avenue as a garment cutter. He really didn't cut very many garments, though. But he cut up Building 261, all right. You can't take that away from him. Incidentally, he's never been content with only one piece. He always carries two."

That was Thomas (Two-Gun Tommy) DeSimone, late of a very handy halfway house in midtown known as the Community Treatment Center.

"The next one would probably be better off as a bouncer in a dive somewhere. He's mean enough. And he seems to enjoy hurting people. He's cheap, too. As cheap as they come. Used to stick up gas stations for a living. He's way out of his element in this racket. Someday soon the gang will find that out, and when they do, I tell you, he's a dead man. I'm betting they get to him before you guys do."

Ferrara was right. The body of Joseph (Gas Station Joey) Manri, the man who gratuitously pistol-whipped the Lufthansa guard, eventually turned up, slumped in the front seat well of a Buick LeSabre parked on a Flatlands street. The mob had found him before the G-men did.

"A Sicilian. An illegal alien. A wild man with his trigger finger. And also a bit of a vamp. Maybe another dead man too, if he doesn't watch his

step.”

Paola (the Vamp) LiCastri didn’t watch his step.

“Then there’s another old Ozone Park hand. He’s got two European nations in his blood—Ireland and France. In a sense. Figure this one out if you can: Ireland ’cause that’s where he’s from, and ’cause he’s got the map of the West Country on his face, and ‘cause he acts like he just got off the boat, copy of *The Echo* in one hand and a bottle or a bomb or a piece in the other. And France ’cause his biggest job before this one matched him up against the Frenchies. And the frogs, I hate to say it, got the better of him.”

Terry Ferrara had a strange way of expressing her patriotism. She was describing a donkey named Robert (Frenchie) McMahon, a man for whom true happiness began with a libation containing malt, rice, barley, milled corn, choicest hops, and brewer’s yeast—a man whose falling-down-drunkenness one evening in 1972, it was said by the wise guys and the insiders, was the sole reason that the Robert’s Lounge Gang botched the $3 million hijacking of an Air France truck at Kennedy Airport.

“Then there’s the only PR mixed up in the operation.”

That was a Puerto Rican courier and bit actor named Anthony Martinez, current status and whereabouts unknown.

“This next one, he’s fat, and he’s a driver.”

That was a chauffeur and minor co-conspirator named Fat Frankie the Driver, current status and whereabouts unknown.

“Then you’ve got the biggest candyman in the south of Queens.”

That was an aging drug smuggler, on the skids these days, named Joseph (Joey Beck) DiPalermo, current status and whereabouts unknown, believed to be in hiding.

And finally she described a pair of cargo workers on the Red Baron’s payroll. The G-men perked up when they heard that, but Ferrara was vaguer

than ever. The first of these insiders was a “kraut’s kraut, a man who came to rob but instead got robbed.”

That was a German national and Lufthansa employee named Peter Gruenewald, who devised the original Plan for taking his bosses, only to have it swiped by his best friend.

Of Gruenewald’s co-worker and erstwhile best friend, the man who ripped off that Plan, Ferrara would only say, “He bowls an average game of 216.”

That was Louis Werner, of course. The routine of Wednesday-night bowling with the airport league had come to symbolize the drudgery of his lot, the drudgery he had hoped to get away from after his adventure in grand larceny. But the only place he got away to was prison, where the drudgery was just as bad or worse; where there was even less to do; where there was nothing to do, as the old expression had it, but time.

“This next guy, he don’t know who the hell he is. He’s never been able to make up his mind whether he’s a hood on “The Late Late Show,” or a coon from Carolina. He acts both parts. His skin is black, but not very, so he can fake it either way, and he does. Poor bastard. Sings the blues in Robert’s Lounge. Wears a black cap which sort of gives him away, a black chauffeur’s cap.

“Oh, I almost forgot to tell you—he’s dead now. He got hit just seven days after the job, and just a few days before you brought me here.”

That was Steven (Stacks) Edwards, the very first homicide statistic in the Lufthansa death toll. Stacks had a problem: he didn’t know whether it was best for him to go around slapping everybody five, hanging out with “the brothers” and railing against “the man,” or whether he really belonged on the lower rungs of the Italian wise-guy network and on the hustle in

Ozone Park. Stacks would die with that problem unresolved. Or perhaps his murder solved it for him—he simply didn't belong anywhere.

"Then there's the mug who croaked the black man. You look up at his face and you see him grinning down at you with all his teeth like you're the greatest thing in the world, and you wonder how on earth he could've chalked up some twenty notches without blinking. What a smile that guy's got! But if a contract with your name on it comes out of a meet and he gets it, then you can start making out your will. Chances are you'll belong to history inside of a month, and chances are they'll find what's left of you somewhere between Flatlands Avenue and Avenue U. He's got an awfully strange way of remembering the old neighborhood."

In the next few months, Flatlands Tony would be remembering the old neighborhood quite a bit. He would make its streets run red with blood. He would litter its lots with corpses. And he would leave its lawmen shaking their heads as they stood helplessly by their prowl cars, cursing themselves for having lost forever still one more link in the case, and wondering who would be next. Already the ace torpedo was loose on the streets. Already the wise guys were ducking for cover. Already it was time to go on the mattress, and stay there.

And all the while, in a tenement in Bedford-Stuyvesant, a canary named Terry Ferrara was chirping her last song. She chirped and chirped, but for a time, because of the intentionally unclear language that she used, it seemed that she was doing little more than peddling a lot of folderol.

For the Federal investigators, the contrast could not have been more damning. Ferrara was in the slums, talking and talking and talking; Flatlands Tony was out on the streets, stalking and stalking and stalking. An FBI stenographer sat in a vermin-infested hovel, scrawling and scrawling

and scrawling. A bunch of Queens hoods squared off in a life-and-death battle, clawing and clawing and clawing.

An uncomfortable truth had come to settle like a shroud over the Lufthansa investigation: If the FBI's special agents wanted to milk "confidential informant W-16-j, known to be reliable in the past" for all she was worth, then it was obvious that pretty soon they'd have to come crawling and crawling and crawling. And crawl they eventually did.

Back on Queens Boulevard, the unsmiling eyes looked more disapproving than ever. The familiar jowls and the double chin seemed to sag more than usual. And the rigid, bulldog face of J. Edgar Hoover bulged out of its picture frame and frowned.

FBI transcripts of those long Bed-Stuy days reveal that a great deal more was discussed than the personalities of the perps. Ferrara would provide G-men with one of her minute biographies, but then it might be hours or even days before she would provide them with another one. And in the meantime, the subject was always the same—how much?

"Don't worry," the agents told her the first time she demanded money, "we'll take care of you." But Ferrara was still worrying. They promised her protection on an army base somewhere in New Jersey, and they promised her Benjamin Franklin. But that was not good enough. "I'm not going to no army base," she snapped. "And I'm *certainly* not going to New Jersey. I want to see a money offer spelled out on paper, a big-bucks offer, or all you get from me from now on is a few more bones and no meat with anything in it other than fat and gristle."

The FBI bosses knew that eventually they'd have to play ball with Ferrara, but they were desperately stalling for time. They were trying to pin

down the intangibles she was tossing at them. They were trying to come up with the names behind the shadowy sketches she supplied. And above all, perhaps, they were trying to talk her down from the steep cash settlement she was demanding. But the clock ticked on and the days slipped by as the federals haggled with Ferrara over her fee. And in that crucial interim, Flatlands Tony went on the prowl, the $10 Million Getaway got farther away, and the chances of ever cracking the Lufthansa case became more and more remote. The bottom line was that the feds at first were simply too cheap to buy a reasonably honorable solution to the case, and too proud to come crawling. It was a problem that was bound up in the FBI personality. Fully fifteen days after they first brought Ferrara to Bed-Stuy, they finally decided that they would buy that solution. Fully fifteen days after they first holed up in the slums, they finally came crawling to her and coughed up the big-buy money. But by then, it was already too late. By then, the elusive solution had already receded far beyond the government men's graps. Not only that, but it would not be long before the agents were unable to put their hands on any live suspects. Only the dead ones.

"I have a story to tell about Kennedy Airport," Terry Ferrara had said back on Queens Boulevard a few days earlier. But what she neglected to mention until Bedford-Stuyvesant was, "It'll cost you."

It would cost, all right: "Half a million dollars up front. Cash on the barrelhead. No ifs, ands, or buts. Non-negotiable."

Very slowly, it started to dawn on the FBI people that they had no other choice but to oblige her. They were stumped by most of her riddles, and they could only shake their heads in puzzlement as they sorted through the nebulous personality clues she had provided. She had sketched minute biographies of eighteen mobsters who were involved somehow in the planning, the execution, and the bloody aftermath of the Lufthansa job. She

had touched all the bases, omitting no one except herself, a few wise guys, a couple of mobbed-up punks, and a handful of bartenders. But the feds still drew a blank. They figured out the names of some of the people Ferrara was hinting about, but not very many. And when they did come up with a name, she would only confirm it; she would tell them no more about what role in the crime that person had played. She knew worlds more than she would say, that much was obvious; but if they wanted the rest, they would have to buy it. It wasn't really all that much—a stack of greenbacks that amounted to a mere five percent of the proceeds of the Lufthansa heist. A lousy half million dollars in finder's fees.

The feds were convinced that if they got those eighteen names, they could break the case. As it turned out, they were wrong. But in the end, they were prepared to do almost anything to get them—even crawl. That was what those fifteen Bed-Stuy days were all about. Terry Ferrara sat back and wrapped a roomful of feds around her little finger, and together they hammered out a cash pact that was acceptable to her. Only then would she give up the names. Only then would she start solving her own riddles. Only then would she let them pump her. It's all down on paper, another one of the truly zany law enforcement rituals that Lufthansa was famous for. It's all down on paper, for the stenographer scrawled on and on.

They were strange days, those Bed-Stuy days. And it was a strange form of crime control the FBI was practicing. The whole scenario was unlikely enough. And what a setting for it—wooden firetrap in the slums, a fourth-floor walkup at the top of a banana-peel staircase. A white enamel bathtub planted like a piece of furniture square in the middle of the kitchen. Colonies of cockroaches underfoot. The stray rat foraging about in the garbage bags. The greasy smell of fried chicken wafting in from the apartment next door. The soul music blaring from the hand-carried radios

out on the street. And the occasional dull report of a Saturday Night Special in the background.

This was Bedford-Stuyvesant, second only to Harlem as the city's largest black enclave. It was here that a group of white people, bunched up in a floor-through, thrashed out the details of a $10 million heist and negotiated for a $500,000 payoff. They weren't exactly slumming, all these white people, but they made for an incongruous spectacle indeed.

Take the FBI stenographer. Prim and schoolmarmish, she was a fifty-year-old Indiana woman with horn-rimmed glasses, a slab of hair two feet high, and a Midwest mind-set. She belonged in that New York City tenement like gold in an elephant's tooth. But she was on assignment, and she stuck. She stayed there for the fifteen days, sleeping on surplus U.S. Army cots like all the others, scribbling and scrawling night and day, for the conversations she had to record took place night and day. All she would allow herself by way of expressing the disapproval she obviously felt toward the whole situation was an upturned nose and an occasional scowl in Ferrara's direction.

Then there were the G-men, seven or eight of them. They, too, cut strikingly ridiculous figures in that run-down part of Brooklyn. They somehow reminded one of the impeccably dressed colonial Englishman, insisting on his tea and crumpets in the heart of darkest Africa. They were dressed "federal": three-piece Bill Blass suits from the bargain basement of Barney's—glaring contrast to the shoddily dressed hopheads nodding off on the stoop downstairs, or shooting up in the shooting gallery across the way.

Only Terry Ferrara, as beautiful as ever, seemed comfortable in Bed-Stuy, but then she would seem comfortable almost anywhere. She belonged almost anywhere. Never mind the gentle tinkling sound made by the beer bottles as they were smashed in the night; never mind the sneaker-shod

teenagers who jostled old ladies in hallways. Never mind that she had given up a Queen Anne bed in a luxury high-rise for an army cot in a crumbling tinderbox. Never mind that her Christmas dinner of 1978 was but a take-out box of breadcrumb chicken (and no stuffing) from the Kentucky Fried on Myrtle Avenue. Never mind, too, that she saw in the New Year of 1979 with no other libation than a triple-thick shake (and two straws) from the McDonald's on Nostrand Avenue.

Never mind Bed-Stuy. She would go a good deal farther afield than that, if she had to. The only thing that mattered now was her $500,000 score, and as long as that score was big enough, Terry Ferrara would gladly have journeyed all the way to Uttar Pradesh or the Great Western Erg or points beyond to get her hands on it. Never mind Bed-Stuy. The only thing that mattered now was how many naturals she could roll, and how many points she could make before crapping out.

Terry Ferrara was playing for high stakes—life-or-death stakes, the highest stakes anyone could ever play for, the highest stakes of her career. She was laying almost certain gangland execution against the slim chances of a real jackpot. She was demanding some green, but not just the usual wad of Benjamin Franklins. Real green. The genuine article. A mint. Half a million dollars up front. Cash on the barrelhead. No ifs, ands, or buts. Non-negotiable.

Amazingly, according to an FBI agent involved in one aspect of the transaction, she got it.

Amazingly, according to this same source, the FBI came crawling.

"Pay the lady," shouts the croupier at the craps table. "And I don't mean maybe!"

On January 7, 1979, the following notice appeared in small type on the back page of the three New York dailies:

REWARD NOTICE: UP TO U.S. $500,000

On December 11, 1978, cargo was stolen from the Lufthansa air cargo terminal at John F. Kennedy Airport, New York. Cargo interests are prepared to pay a reward not exceeding U.S. $500,000 of the recovered value of the stolen property.

In the event that more than one source supplies information leading to the successful recovery of such stolen property, consisting of U.S. currency and jewelry, the parties furnishing the information will share equally, based on the value of the goods recovered as negotiated. The reward will become due after identification and return of the stolen property.

This is not an offer, but a notice subject to acceptance.

This notice expires March 31, 1979.

Please contact the FBI, (212) 459-3140, with any information concerning this matter.

That was exactly how Terry Ferrara intended to collect. Those were the cash terms she had come to with the Bureau in a truly unprecedented reward pact. It was a reward that virtually had her name on it, and reliable Bureau sources say she had actually helped to draft its terms as she sat cooped up in that Bed-Stuy tenement. The “cargo interests” referred to were the insurance carriers who had to absorb the losses from the heist, and at Ferrara’s urging, the FBI had reportedly put the arm on them for the reward money. The underwriters didn’t come up with enough, however, and since Ferrara would not budge one cent from her $500,000 demand, the Bureau

was forced to kick in some equity of its own to make up the difference. It was half a million dollars, nothing less. In return, confidential informant W-16-j promised to throw fewer curve balls at the feds.

From that day on, she played it straight. She kept on playing it straight, right up until the day she died.

The reward offer was unique in that it promised cash in return for property recovered, as opposed to the more standard “information leading to a conviction” type of reward. That was the way Ferrara wanted it. She figured she had a better chance of staying alive if she tried to wrestle the swag away from the mobsters, rather than trying to take their freedom away by sending them to jail. She figured wrong. But that was the theory behind the whole deal.

“It’s the type of reward deal most likely to produce information,” said FBI agent Frank S. Monserrate. It made sense. “If I called you and said, ‘There’s $5 million buried under the Unisphere at the World’s Fair,’ and you go and dig it up, that’s a lot easier than saying, ‘Frankie B. did it, and he’s got the money.’ The hole under the Unisphere’s not going to come back and blow your head off; Frankie B. probably will.”

Terry Ferrara knew exactly what she was doing when she framed the reward, but, unfortunately for her, there was a Frankie B. in her life, lurking not very far away. He was waiting for her, biding his time, smiling with all his teeth as though he hadn’t a care in the world, knowing full well that it was just a matter of time before he’d catch up with her at last. His name was Flatlands Tony.

Tragically, the genesis of the reward pact was also the genesis of the Ferrara execution. Inside of a month, she would be gone.

Who was this woman whose fortunes rose and fell so precipitously with the fortunes of the Robert's Lounge Gang and the FBI respectively? Who was she that she should become so critical to both sides of the law? How had this shapely Long Island hairdresser become the *femme fatale* of the Lufthansa story?

The personality of Terry Ferrara, like the whole twisted saga of the pursuit itself, is fraught with complexities and imponderables. She had sketched minute biographies of all the perps who were in on the job, but how could you ever sketch a biography of her? In many ways, she was more complicated than all the rest of them put together. As a double agent, you never knew where her loyalties lay. She would blow the whistle on certain scams, but she would reap the spoils from others, and the only thing that appeared to motivate her was whatever would profit her the most.

Ferrara's MO was remarkable. She would simply go to parties and discos and watering holes, the haunts of the jet set and the mob, and strut her stuff. It was said she was a marvel on the dance floor and that she didn't often go home alone. The point of all this frenzied social activity was that it allowed her to make the contacts she needed in her field. She was attracted to mobsters; it was that simple. And she knew how to play them for all they were worth and use one as a stepping stone to the next. That was how she steadily advanced through the labyrinthine layers of the underworld. Once she had latched onto a racketeer, she would either skim his racket for her own pockets, or she would bust it. She wasn't particular. But she had a knack for being at the right place at the right time, with her ears in on the planning and her eyes on the big money. The FBI had never developed a better songbird.

Terry Ferrara was the bored proprietress of a unisex beauty salon on the Island, but she had a thousand other faces. Was she really, as some people

claimed, a kind of Dragon Lady? Was she really, as others said, a $250-a-throw slattern? Or was she actually a slightly more dignified doxy who used sex the way Mata Hari did, to ferret out information? Was she a woman with an extraordinarily warped notion of law enforcement? Or was she just a promoter who wanted no more than to make a killing for herself and then get out?

It seemed likely, given the multifaceted Ferrara personality, that she was all those things. Yet above all, perhaps, she wanted to make a killing for herself and get out. She'd make a killing, all right, but she would never get out. She should have known better, a street-wise sophisticate like her; the only way out of a racket like that is feet-first in a pine box.

You couldn't whitewash Terry Ferrara. No way. There wasn't enough paint in all of the south of Queens to do that. You couldn't really romanticize her, either, tempting as it may have been, although the tabloids were certainly guilty of trying when they pinned the meaningless "mystery woman," "beautiful divorcée," and "stunning brunette adventuress" labels on her. Ferrara did a lot for the law, it was true, but always for a price. And while her tips may have allowed Nassau drug agents to put the screws on the Long Island Connection, she had long ago helped to forge that connection, and she had profited from it enormously. Besides, how could you romanticize a stoolie who'd set up the connections that had led inevitably to ghetto rooftops and grimy alleyways where young men and women stuck needles into their arms? How could you romanticize anyone who'd helped bring the Plague to neighborhoods like Bedford-Stuyvesant?

It was only after the federals finally bought her reward scheme that Terry Ferrara was ready to come clean. And once she started to spill, there was no stopping her. Back in the days when she was talking in riddles, it must have been easier to divine the political currents of China by reading

wall posters than it was to make head or tail of what she was saying. But now, in a mad rush of words that lasted three days, she told all. She identified the Lufthansa Six and all the hangers-on, and she launched into a detailed description of the murderously Byzantine moves of the mobsters—up, down, and into the grave. And so it was that the Bed-Stuy days came to an end, and the G-men went out of the tenement and after their quarry with a vengeance.

But first, the stenographer's transcripts reveal, Ferrara proffered a few unsolicited words of advice to the pursuers. "Always remember," she told them patronizingly, "the solving of a crime like this is much like the playing of a violin. All the strings have to be taut, or there's no music."

But it was the curse of the Lufthansa pursuit that the strings were never very taut, and all the music was hopelessly out of tune.

Ferrara was informing after the fact, that was the first problem—long after the fact, and after she had already made her pile on the deals she was informing about. She was still minimizing her own role, of course, and she had kept for herself the money that was her share of the mob payoff, turning in, as evidence, only the empty bank wrappers that money had once been packaged in.

There were other problems too, as the G-men discovered on January 10, 1979, the day they finally sped away from the spooks and zombies and hypes of Bed-Stuy, and—armed with Ferrara's intelligence—tried to track down the gang. For one thing, they learned, the gang was hard to track. Its stalwarts no longer drank at Robert's Lounge, the place was too hot. One by one, the hoods had gone off to await their various fates. Some were in hiding, some were on the street, some were doomed men by now, and one of them, Stacks Edwards, was already dead and buried. Yet it wasn't just that the crooks had proved such an elusive lot, for even when the feds were

able to smoke them out, they were still unable to make any arrests. They could bug the perps' cars and wiretap their phones and eavesdrop on their conversations and skip-trace them 'round-the-clock and interrogate them until their ears sizzled, but it didn't do them much good, because they still couldn't hang a rap on them. Not yet. Not until they had something more to go on. Not until they were able to gather the hard material evidence. Not until their Exhibit A was something more substantial than a stack of empty bank wrappers. And not until they were able to persuade another one of the conspirators to come forward and, in return for a grant of immunity from prosecution, supply depositions and give testimony that would corroborate Ferrara's story.

Until then, the FBI was in a real bind, although its latest predicament was also quite comical. The Bureau had to talk one man out of a crew of eighteen hard-core, hard-boiled, hardbitten mobsters into first turning canary, and then turning state's evidence. Good luck.

The agents' first target was Tony Ducks. They should have known better. Getting him to join the Federal Witness Program was like getting the Ayatollah Khomeini to enroll in a rabbinical school. When the five G-men came calling at his Queens home, Tony Ducks invited them in for a glass or two of red wine, which they dutifully refused. Then he motioned them into the study, where he ran his business operations, and they sank deep into his plushly cushioned mahogany chairs. Then Tony Ducks, surrounded by his battery of high-priced lawyers, waved his hands and grandly opened the floor to questions. These he fielded with all the aplomb of the master politician, giving away nothing, or at least nothing that could send him or anybody else to jail. The feds were exasperated by his obvious savvy under fire, the gentle politeness of his answers, the fact that he had told them nothing useful about the irksome matter of Building 261. When the agents

finally got up to leave and Tony Ducks insisted on shaking hands all around, one of them balked.

“We know your record,” he said. “We know exactly what you’ve done. We probably know a lot more about you than you think. How are you going to weasel out of this one?”

It was only then, and just for an instant, that Tony Ducks lost his cool. “I’ve never weaseled out of anything in my life,” he shot back, and you could imagine in a flash that you saw his fangs gleaming. But he quickly regained his composure. “Gentlemen,” he assured them, “I’m getting too old for this line of work.” Then Tony Ducks showed the G-men to the door, and just before he bade them farewell, he borrowed a leaf from Exxon. “Besides,” he said with a remarkably straight face, “there’s no money in this business anymore.”

All this from the man who owned a pretty hefty piece of the $10 million rock.

Next on the FBI’s agenda was Paul Vario, Sr. Another carload of federals paid him a call at his Florida retreat. “Building 261,” mused Vario. “Where’s that? I haven’t been back to New York in years. Do they still have that coon blues singer at Robert’s Lounge?”

When the agents informed Vario that the “coon blues singer” had been murdered and that perhaps he knew something about it, Vario just shook his head sadly and gave that “there but for the grace of God go I look which is so typical of the elderly New Yorker who has moved down to Florida in early retirement to escape the burgeoning crime rate back home. When the feds asked Vario about the Lufthansa job, he played the senile old man and evinced a sudden interest in discussing the latest wild fluctuations in the scrap-metal market in Jersey City. When they asked about all the couriers who had been down to see him recently, he explained patiently that they

were emissaries from friends who had come to inquire about his failing health. And when they pressed him for details, he rang for his personal physician, who was conveniently stationed in the next room, and began to complain of chest pains. The physician gave him a quick shot of something, and in seconds Paul Vario, Sr. was fast asleep and snoring loudly, as the FBI agents stood open-mouthed in disbelief.

Vario claimed to have a bad heart condition, and indeed he had experienced chest pains so many times when he was on the spot that he had come to believe it himself. The physician was part of his domestic staff, like a butler or a maid, and he spent all day in the house ministering to Vario's needs, putting him to sleep when the law showed up, waking him up when the law left.

After another incident or two like that, the G-men would realize, that Vario and Tony Ducks, who of course would never turn, were virtually immune from prosecution anyway. Their power, position, and prestige in the mob had left them unassailable. It allowed them to amass the greatest fortunes that Lufthansa had to offer, while taking none of the customary risks. At that level, they were insulated both from the law and the wrath of the other mobsters. Accordingly, the agents decided to concentrate their probe on the more vulnerable of the suspects, the stickup men and hangers-on, the men who had risked all, but gained comparatively little. Perhaps these hoodlums would be less wary than seasoned pros like Ducks and Vario. Perhaps they would be more susceptible to deals. Perhaps they could be opened up. But then again, perhaps not.

The federals caught up with Little Marty Krugman one afternoon as he was out *spatziering* down Queens Boulevard. "Don't be a fool!," one of the agents shouted at him as he walked by. "Talk with us! You need our protection. With what you know, what's the line on your staying alive very

long without us?" Little Marty never even broke stride. "With what I know," he asked rhetorically, "what's the line on me staying alive very long even *with* you?"

Little Marty knew the odds. That was his job. Because he was a bookmaker, he knew better than most the truth of the old Damon Runyon line, "All life is seven-to-five against." He kept on walking.

The FBI struck out all over town. When they found Richard Eaton, they sat him down and interviewed him for over an hour, but Eaton was more ethereal than ever, and in the course of a highly unproductive conversation he even managed to work in a few quotes from Sophocles and one from Verlaine. According to the Bureau's confidential transcripts, an agent asked him at one point why an intelligent man like him, who could have made as much money legitimately as he did in other ways, was still pursuing a misguided life of crime. Eaton's response: "The leopard cannot change his spots, nor the skunk his stripes."

Back in Florida, the crook-stalkers had no better luck. Sources inside organized crime say the feds traced Mr. Y's green Corvair to his favorite tobacconist off Collins Avenue in Miami Beach. Then they confronted him, according to the account, and boasted that they had him cold. But Mr. Y couldn't take them seriously, and he even allowed himself a few jibes at their expense. "I've got ten big ones in my pockets right now," he told them. "On a government salary, you guys are lucky if you've got more than two or three sawbucks. You're in the wrong racket, gentlemen." Then he cracked open his box of H. Upmanns, one of several he had just bought, and offered the cigars all around. The agents dutifully declined, just as their counterparts in New York had declined when Tony Ducks offered them wine. FBI regulations are very stringent about that sort of thing. And the humorless face of J. Edgar Hoover is never very far away.

As Mr. Y puffed away, aiming his smoke rings square in the federals' faces, one of the men said to him with contempt, "I know what kind of a man you are. The kind who'll do a job, any job at all, and always with no questions asked."

"You are wrong," Mr. Y corrected gently, and then he borrowed a line from Philip Marlowe. "There is always one: 'How much?'"

Mr. Y was pleased with himself after that one, according to the mob version of the story, and as he got in his car to drive away you could see the cigar smoke swirling. The precious boxes of H. Upmanns were piled high on the seat next to him, and the G-men could only glower as the Corvair vanished somewhere along a motel-and-condominium strip known as Collins Avenue. (Not surprisingly, the FBI "officially" denies that account of its Florida misadventure.)

Needless to say, Mr. Y had elected not to cooperate with the FBI. John Angelo Sepe, Louis Werner, and Peter Gruenewald would soon be making the same decision, though circumstances would ultimately persuade Gruenewald to change his mind. As for the other crooks, most of them could not be found. They were already on the lam, and on their ten separate paths to the graveyard. That left only Jimmy the Gent Burke.

The agents sat down with Burke at a table in the Cosmic Coffee Shop. They asked him what he felt about the commandos who stole $10 million from the Red Baron's coffers. "Well," he said lazily, "it's not like they killed a priest or anything." He liked the ring of that, so he repeated it again, softly, almost to himself: "No, it's not like they killed a priest."

The agents asked him about all those fifty and hundred-dollar bills he had been seen papering the saloons of Queens with. Burke was in the mood for one-liners: "Maybe I won the Irish Sweepstakes."

They asked him if he ever heard of a big cash shipment from Frankfurt. But Burke claimed never even to have heard of Frankfurt. “Frankfurt?” he asked, and there was a quizzical look on his face. “Where is that? Oh, I know, it’s probably one of those little towns across the drink between Weehawken and Fort Lee. No, never heard of it.”

Then they asked him what he was doing in Ozone Park when he was supposed to be working as a garment cutter on Fashion Avenue. “Selling Girl Scout cookies,” said Jimmy the Gent bitterly, “and I challenge you guys to prove otherwise.”

Burke, who was as volatile as a gambling stock like Bally, had just flared up. That was typical. He was constitutionally incapable of having a conversation with a jacket-and-tie federal lawman for more than ten minutes without losing his temper.

Now he stood up and headed for the door. “You’ll excuse me of course, gentlemen, but I’ve got to be going. Transactional analysis, you know. Transactional analysis. Hope I’ve been able to be of some assistance to you.”

The agents grumbled when they heard that.

Burke still had a week of his term left to serve out at the Otel Bryant, and he really did have to be going. But just before he left, he turned and uttered a few cryptic words to his listeners. “If you really want to solve this case,” he said moodily, “I suggest you pray to St. Michael.”

St. Michael? The agents were puzzled. What was that all about? What the federals didn’t realize at the time was that they had just heard from a hardened gangster who had once, a long time ago, been an innocent altar boy who had liked nothing better than to light the vigil candles. St. Michael? Was this some sort of a veiled hint that Burke was giving them?

The agents submitted the problem to the FBI's crack research department in Washington.

The answer came back from D.C. a few days later: St. Michael was the patron saint of law enforcement.

Jimmy the Gent wasn't exactly selling Girl Scout cookies in Ozone Park. Nobody was that naive. But how could you prove what he really was doing?

In the Chicago of Alphonse (Scarface Al) Capone, there was an expression, "The road to the cooler is never smooth." And it was still true. As every self-respecting, self-made man and mob rabbi worth his salt knew, it was a rocky road that was paved with land mines and roadblocks and booby traps of every description. With a little criminal hocus-pocus and perhaps just a dash of legal legerdemain in the right places, you could beat almost any rap.

In the matter of Lufthansa, the FBI had learned this rather belatedly and it was quite a blow to the Bureau's pride. The strings have to be taut, Terry Ferrara had cautioned the federals, but they weren't listening.

Thanks to Ferrara's tips, the G-men had the names of all the perps, but so meticulously had those perps covered up their tracks that the good guys were still unable to make any arrests. And when the killings began, those tracks would be covered up better still. The agents could zero in on the robbery's commanders, and they could hound its footsoldiers, but what they could not do was come up with a grain of evidence to pin it on them, and they probably never will. They knew in their hearts who did it, but unfortunately, they were unable to prove it in the only place that mattered—a court of law. The FBI has pledged to pursue the case until the statute of

limitations on it runs out, but at this point, almost two years after the crime, the Bureau is still beating a dead horse.

There would be only one bright spot. Peter Gruenewald, the man whose Plan to “make a robbery” was itself robbed, would eventually decide to talk. But Gruenewald knew very little about the grand design of the crime, and the only person he could point a finger at was Louis Werner. Gruenewald would go after the same $500,000 reward that Terry Ferrara had died trying to get her hands on. Gruenewald is not dead yet—though a lot of Lou Werner’s friends would like to sit him down in a quiet place somewhere and have a talk with him—but he had no better luck getting his hands on the reward money than Ferrara did. Since none of the swag was ever recovered, no reward was ever given out. The only thing Gruenewald’s chatter accomplished was that it sent Lou Werner to prison for sixteen and a half years. Werner was just a poor sap who got left holding the bag for a lot of tougher men.

Werner was the obvious fallguy, he was made for the part, and he would soon become the only person to be charged or tried in the case. But all that was still to come.

In the meantime, the NYPD was getting restless. Was it frustration? Was it desperation? Was it just good, old-fashioned, investigative common sense? Or were the bulls merely tired of poking around the crematoriums of Woodlawn Cemetery? In any case, they decided they could have been tricked by the FBI, and that the only way to get even was to have their operatives trail the Bureau’s. So the city cops tailed the G-men, and that was the only way they finally learned the names of the suspects in the case. That was how they came to join the ill-starred procession that followed John Angelo Sepe down Linden Boulevard one wintry day. The Port

Authority cops and the New York State Police had already adopted the tactic.

And so the various branches of the constabulary feuded on.

Winter of 1978–79. It wasn't exactly like the killer winter mat drove Napoleon out of Russia. But for the hapless bluecoats, it was killing enough. It killed their probe, once and for all.

The chase conducted by the mobsters was slightly more effective. It was the chase for the head of Terry Ferrara.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Doing the Big Job

> “And they tell me you are crooked and I answer: Yes, it is true,
> I have seen the gunman kill and go free to kill again.”
>
> Carl Sandburg,
> “Chicago”

It was 1827 in Scotland, and the anatomy students at the University of Edinburgh had a problem: they had run out of human corpses to dissect. Traditional sources had dried up; donors were scarce; derelicts were no longer considered fair game; and a new campaign had put dozens of graverobbers—“resurrectionists” they were called back then—behind bars. The flesh pits at Surgeons’ Square were empty and forlorn, had been for months, and something clearly had to be done about it. So a doctor named Knox quietly put out the word that his school was in the cadaver market. He was offering a generous ten pounds and no questions asked for good specimens, male or female. He also promised to shell out a few extra shillings as a bonus if there were no marks left on the bodies of the deceased. That made the autopsy work cleaner. The only stipulation was that the stiffs be delivered in the dead of night.

A down-and-outer from County Tyrone named William Burke was quick to answer the call. Burke's only weapons were a pillow and a bottle of Scotch. His victims were the poor of Edinburgh, people just like himself—the peddlers, the panhandlers, the pot-scrubbers, the prostitutes. He would lure them to his lodging house, allow them to drown their sorrows with his whiskey, and then, while they slept, slip a pillow over their heads and smother them. They died peacefully, as Burke would later tell a magistrate's court, contentedly, in their sleep. Dr. Knox was as good as his word. He forked over the money each time Burke brought in another corpse, and he forked it over quite a lot. It's believed that Burke asphyxiated at least sixteen people in a killing spree that finally ended on that winter day in 1829 when he paid the price for his crimes on the gibbet at Edinburgh market cross.

William Burke, Irishman and apparent distant blood relative of Jimmy the Gent Burke, was gone, but his name lived on. It passed into the English language as *burking*, a word used to describe his particularly sick method of murder. To *burke*, says Webster, is "to suffocate or strangle in order to obtain an unmarked body to be sold for purposes of dissection."

Burke lived on in other ways, too. When Jimmy the Gent wanted to rattle someone, gangland sources say, he was known to demand aggressively, "You ever heard of Willie Burke?" Then, without so much as waiting for an answer, he would straighten his shoulders and thump his chest and say with pride, "He was one of my ancestors." But it seldom worked as a means of rattling his adversaries, for few of them had ever heard of the notorious pillow murderer who bore his name.

Yet perhaps the most far-reaching of the many dubious legacies of William Burke was the professional hit. Burke practically invented it. Mob historians and crime chroniclers will tell you that he was one of the very

first known criminals who ever killed on contract. The identity of his mark was of no importance to him, all he was after was meat for the med school butchers. He never killed out of passion, but always for a score, and his work marked the beginning of a grisly tradition. Whole generations of hired killers would come after him and refine what he had begun. They would have specific targets whom they would run down and then mow down. They would be paid handsomely. They would move on to the next job.

But William Burke was the first. And like Burke, most of the torpedoes who were his spiritual heirs would meet violent ends. There was no such thing as death by natural causes in that line of work.

From the British Isles in the 1820s, the scene shifts to the big American cities, most notably New York and Chicago, at the turn of the century. This was where the gangland kill really came into its own, descending almost to the level of a perverse art form as hit men of every stripe terrorized the ghettos and ethnic neighborhoods of the sprawling metropolis. There were Jewish street gangs and Irish marauders, Cantonese tongs and Hong Kong highbinders. There was the Sicilian Mafia, the Neapolitan Camorra, and the Calabrian Black Hand.

There was even a Lower East Side tough named Monk Eastman who won for himself a place in the annals of the hit forever when he bought newspaper linage in seven different dailies to advertise his strongarm services.

Ear chawed off	$15,
Leg or arm broke	$19,
Shot in leg	$25,
Stab	$25,
Doing the Big Job	$100 and up.

One day they found Monk Eastman in a Rivington Street gutter. He was lying facedown in a puddle of blood, and there were five bullets in his back. Someone had turned the tables and done the Big Job on him. Someone had used his own price list to eliminate him.

And so the pattern had been set; the hitman had been hit.

By the time the 1930s rolled around, a colorful young Irish killer named Vincent (Mad Dog) Coll had emerged as another master of this particular black art. When Coll was on the prowl, you ducked for cover. As informant Joseph Valachi put it, “This mad dog was going around shooting up everybody in New York.” Coll did have quite a reputation. In the grand style, he used to carry his tommy gun in a violin case, and when he paid a call on one of his marks, he would display a length of heavy metal pipe and explain patiently, “Here are my credentials.” The Mad Dog had another trick he had learned from his Italian cohorts: he would rub garlic on his bullets to make sure that the wounds he left would become infected. He was what the wise guys called a “cowboy,” a wild man who was not content merely to frame a murder and then step back and watch the action from the sidelines, but who actually had to be in on the kill himself.

Before the Mad Dog could reach thirty notches, however, he was retired. Mob-style. As he stepped into a phone booth in a West 23rd Street drugstore, he was riddled with submachine-gun bullets and speared with glass shards as pieces of the door to the phone booth blew off into his face.

Homicide-squad veterans still like to tell each other the old story of the old Sicilian ferryboat captain who was smuggled into New York as a mob enforcer in 1935. He was what the boys liked to call a “Mustache Pete,” their none-too-affectionate term for an Old World Italian “greaseball.” The Captain seemed to sweat olive oil and to emit the pungent aroma of garlic; the red stains of spaghetti sauce always seemed to dapple his suits, and his

handlebar mustache was black and bushy. He wore rings on most of his fingers, and he was always bedecked with bracelets and necklaces. Yet when it came to his work, he was a professional, no doubt about it. When the Captain had a body to dispose of, he would consult his tide tables and then wait until the precise moment when the ebb tide was at its swiftest. Then he would heave the stiff into the drink, and invariably it would be swept out to sea. No one would ever see it again. No one would ever find the evidence needed to convict him of murder.

When the Captain's time finally came, the thugs who dumped him weren't nearly so clean. They popped him into the East River when the incoming tide was at its fullest, and within the hour his body had washed up alongside the bulkhead at Coenties Slip. Because the killers couldn't read the tide tables, the evidence was discovered; a cop on a lunch break from the old First Precinct stationhouse glanced into the water that night and saw a floater amid the muck and the sewage of the river. The only reason he noticed the body at all, according to the yellowing police report from the 1930s, was that he spotted something metallic that seemed to be glinting from out of the dark shadows in the channel: the rings and the bracelets and necklaces of a Mustache Pete who had been brought over from Sicily to kill. Several hundred carats' worth. The Captain liked jewelry, and so he became in the end a very bejeweled corpse.

Doing the Big Job. No one has ever drawn up actuarial tables for that line of work. But one thing is certain—it is a trade with a very short life expectancy, and great occupational hazards.

Doing the Big Job. It has been a long, long time, of course, since that fatal evening when the Captain went off for his swim with the fishes. Back then, you could buy a newspaper for three cents, a hot dog for a nickel, a subway token for a dime. In those days, you could drive to Ebbets Field in

your Studebaker, or the Polo Grounds in your Packard. A lot has changed since then, but one thing has not changed—the personality of the men whose guns are for hire. Torpedos come and torpedos go, but that alone has stayed the same. They may make good stories, but they are not good men. They are men with no conscience whatsoever. They are men who know, as only doctors should know, that human flesh is fundamentally no different than beef or mutton. They are men who can go to sleep soundly after a day of doing the devil's work, and never face Poe's "eidolons of the night."

Flatlands Tony and Tony Ducks never faced the eidolons of the night.

Neither of them were cowboys, but both of them were labeled as killers by the law, and both, in their own ways, were masters at Doing the Big Job. Tony Ducks would give the orders, it was said, then Flatlands Tony would frame the hit; the one would pick the target, and then the other would execute that target. It was said that the two men had great respect for each other's work, but it is probable that they never met. The mob didn't work that way. A series of interviews conducted over a year-long period with both cops and crooks revealed that it worked like this: If Tony Ducks wanted to let a contract, he would messenger it to Paul Vario, Sr. in Florida. Vario would then pass it on to Mr. Y, and Mr. Y, in his turn, would transmit it to another button man in a different part of the state. This hood would bring the contract back north, but slowly, circuitously, and usually through another intermediary, perhaps a member of the Angelo Bruno crime family in Philadelphia. From there, it would finally reach Flatlands Tony. But then it would be farmed out one more time as Flatlands Tony, smiling with all his teeth, passed it on to a flunky of his own. The process could take a day or a week or a month. But however long it took, it wouldn't be much later that an assassin would strike, and a man would die. This was how Stacks died, this was how Two-Gun Tommy died, this was how Terry Ferrara died;

this was how all the dead of the Lufthansa heist died; all of them, except, of course, Flatlands Tony himself.

It was a good system, this maze of pass-alongs, especially for the guy on top. Legally, Tony Ducks may have been just as guilty as the man who pulled the trigger, but how to prove it? He was, in fact, safely beyond the reach of the law, and he was also insulated from the vengeance of a dead mobster's kin, for how could you trace all the convolutions of the web he had spun, or pierce the protective armor he had wrapped himself in?

He had the awful leisure to kill, it appears, and go free to kill again.

Flatlands Tony and Tony Ducks were both at the tail end of their mid-sixties on that December morning when six guys from Queens burst into Building 261. It was quite a road they had traveled to reach that threshold in their careers. They were young men when the Mad Dog made his last phone call, and when the Captain made his hole in the river. They were just teenagers in the early thirties when the market crashed and Prohibition was repealed. But they grew up fast on the streets of Brooklyn and Queens, and police believe they had each already killed men by the late thirties when Hitler marched into Poland and the world girded for war.

What a pair they made.

Flatlands Tony used to boast that, like the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, he always got his man, and indeed his track record was pretty good. The cops might put out an APB for one of his quarries, but the chances were better than even that he would find him first. His mark might get a message of the sort people used to get in Gothic novels—"Flee, all is discovered"—but the chances were better than even that Flatlands Tony would cut him off at the pass and rudely interrupt that flight. He was a killer who quite frankly enjoyed killing, and his smile proved it. Once, a long time ago, he cornered and confronted one of his intended victims. The man

squirmed and pleaded and begged and tried to bargain for his life, as people will do when they know they are about to lose it. The man complained about what a raw deal he had gotten. Said Flatlands Tony, “Write your congressman,” and then he blew the man’s head off. And then he smiled. Or so the story goes.

It didn’t take Tony Ducks very long to work his way up to the top of the mob hierarchy, but as a footsoldier, he had done his share of the dirty work, too. In 1957, the chief counsel to the Senate Rackets Committee, a man named Robert Kennedy, described Tony Ducks as an “up-and-coming hoodlum with an evil eye who was hired by one employer merely to stand and glare at his employees.” (Tony Ducks took the Fifth eighty-seven times that day.) He was up-and-coming, all right. Pretty soon, no one would be in a position to hire him. He would do the hiring himself. The evil eye that so intrigued Kennedy was already legendary in racketeering circles by the late ’50s. All it took was a glance from those glowering eyes to chill even the most psychopathic button man. If Tony Ducks gave you an order, you did it. Who was going to argue?

It was said in the underworld that Tony Ducks gave a lot of orders in the weeks after December 11, 1978. It was said in the squad rooms that those orders proved fatal to several of the urchins of the Robert’s Lounge Gang. According to several accounts supplied independently by police and gangland sources, those orders resulted directly in the commission of several still-unsolved murders. The law couldn’t prove that, though; the lawmen had an open-and-shut case against Tony Ducks only in their hearts, and they could never take it to court, for it would be laughed out of any courtroom. Besides, there is no such thing as an open-and-shut case in

homicide law. New York State requires two corroborating witnesses in the absence of physical evidence, and in these murder cases there were no witnesses, as well as no physical evidence. Thus, the only things the police had to go on were their own intuition and the solid accounts of informants who could never testify without jeopardizing their own lives. Needless to say, they were not enough. And so it was that Tony Ducks succeeded in ducking still another rap. The fact that he was guilty was not the point. The point was that the law was powerless to prove that he was guilty.

Said one frustrated FBI man, “Here is a guy who has gotten away with murder.”

Quite literally, that appears to be the case.

Murder. Doing the Big Job. In the councils of the underworld, there were few other subjects these days. It seemed remarkable that the aftermath of the heist should be so bloody, that the fabled perfect crime, the crime of the century, should require so many slayings as the basest human passions came to the fore. But for the Godfather who pulled the strings, there must have been fifty warped reasons for each man who had to die. The weak links had to be severed; the people who were susceptible to deals had to go; the mugs who bungled their roles, or opened their traps in the wrong places, or got greedy, or knew too much, all were about to become as extinct as the dodo bird.

But there was more than mere revenge behind the bloodletting. Much more. There was the souring of what the press had termed “the $20 million dream.”

It seemed aeons ago that Little Marty Krugman had stood on a bar stool and raised his glass to the concept of a clean twenty million dollars and zero zero cents. Time and circumstance had made a mockery of his toast, just as time and circumstance would soon make a mockery of Little Marty himself.

Twenty million dollars; it was the stuff that dreams were made of. As if ten million dollars wasn't enough! But it wasn't, from the vantage point of the mob, it really wasn't. All the scheming and plotting had been based on a $20 million windfall, and the crooks had divided up that amount among themselves time and time again in their heads. They knew who would get how much, and every single penny was accounted for. Then they sacked Lufthansa and drove off into the night with a paltry ten million, and so the die was cast that would make the morgue look more like a slaughterhouse. For the heavyweights of the Robert's Lounge Gang, there was now no room (and no money) in their plans for the lightweights, there was now less room (and less money) in their plans for the middleweights, and that was enough to touch off the chain of killings.

It was that simple. Because the division of the score was all shot to hell, because there was now too little money for too many people, it meant that a lot of hoods would have to be disappointed, a lot would have to be cut out, and a lot would have to be killed. As it was, the loot was so enormous that anybody who touched it was endangered. And there were a lot of people who had touched it.

Tony Ducks must have had all of this on his mind on December 12, the day after the Red Baron was caught with its pants down. All day long, Tony Ducks was seen pacing up and down in his gaudily furnished living room, muttering imprecations to himself. He was seen writing down names on a ruled yellow pad, then crumbling up the page in his fist and throwing it into the trash. He was seen consulting with top aides, and the subject was a grim one: death.

That account has been provided by the man who was Tony Ducks' chauffeur and bodyguard for many years, the man who was one of the Mafia chief's closest associates until he turned government informant.

According to his story, just twenty-four hours after the heist, Tony Ducks was already deciding who would live and who would die. Over the next month and a half, as updated intelligence reached the Godfather from his far-flung sources, he would add new names to his hit list. It didn't matter at all if his target had done yeoman's service for the mob in the past, for if he tripped up now, or crossed Tony Ducks now, he was a dead man. There were going to be a lot of dead men.

The image is a powerful and a horrifying one: Tony Ducks sitting back in a thickly padded chair in his walled retreat in the Whitestone section of Queens, orchestrating the killings that would be carried out by others, and that would take place elsewhere. He never even had to step outside his mansion. He never even had to get his hands dirty. All he had to do was pull the strings, and then people would jump, and people would die.

It is almost as if he felt he had amassed Biblical powers over life and death, as if he felt he had been invested with the power to determine, inscribe, and seal, as it is written in the Old Testament: "who shall live, and who shall die; who shall finish his alloted time, and who not; who shall perish by fire, and who by water; who by the sword, and who by wild beasts; who by hunger, and who by thirst; who by an earthquake, and who by the Plague; who by strangling, and who by stoning…"

The frightening thing is that in the sick netherworld in which he operated, Tony Ducks really did have all those powers.

And now the time had come for him to exercise them.

On December 13, he summoned his bodyguard to his study and gave him a message to deliver verbally to Paul Vario, Sr. down in Hollywood, Florida.

The message was brief and to the point. "You know this guy, Stacks Edwards? You'll read about him in the papers. You know this guy, Two-

Gun Tommy DeSimone? You'll read about him in the papers, too."

That was it. No more, no less.

Tony Ducks was a man who didn't like to take any chances. He was fearful that the FBI was always trying to plant eavesdropping devices inside his home, and he was probably right. Two times a week, he had an electronic sweep go through every inch of his house to ferret out bugs. Whenever he had guests, he would frisk them himself to make sure that his conversations weren't being surreptitiously recorded. Even with such precautions, however, he could never be one hundred percent sure of the security he demanded, and so his conversations were always guarded. He developed a whole language of euphemisms that his aides had to become familiar with, and it was this that he was using now. When Tony Ducks wanted someone hit, the command was muffled, and it was always the same: "You'll read about him in the papers." No grand jury would ever be able to return a Murder Two indictment on the basis of that. Similarly, when Tony Ducks heard that his orders had been carried out and that there was one more entry in the police blotter, he would shake his head sadly, and his voice would be tinged with disapproval: "We live in a jungle." Even the most hot-headed young prosecutor would be hard pressed to prosecute on the basis of that, for Tony Ducks' attorneys would be quick to point out that their client was merely offering a social commentary on the alarming pace of urban decay.

"You'll read about him in the papers," Tony Ducks had said, and those seven little innocuous words were enough to touch off a mob bloodbath.

Stacks Edwards lived in the Ozone Park neighborhood of Queens. So did Two-Gun Tommy. Tony Ducks lived up in Whitestone, at the other end of the borough, exactly 9.1 miles away as the New York City pigeon flies. All it would take for the contracts to find their mark was one ten-cent phone

call in the 212 area, from one Flushing exchange to another, or perhaps just a twenty-minute drive down Parsons Boulevard. But the contracts would never be delivered that directly. The game didn't work that way. They would have to be laundered, put at arm's length, deliberately sent on a detour that would take them thousands of miles out of the way. And that was where Vario came in. The hit orders were bounced from Queens to Florida and back to Queens all over again, following a route every bit as tortuous as that traveled by a hungry rat in an endless maze.

At last they were transmitted to the man who would actually do the Big Job. At last they reached a smiling killer named Flatlands Tony.

Flatlands Tony allowed himself a broad, toothy grin, and then he sprang into action.

"It's time to take the gloves off," he said somewhat idiotically, as if he had ever had them on. "It's time to take the gloves off."

That could only mean one thing.

"Waiting for death." That's what the Homicide Squad detectives called it when they were between assignments, when they were biding their time until the normal rotation brought them their next case. Waiting for death. In New York City, where the bodies rising from the bottom of the East River to the surface was one of the harbingers of spring, you never had to wait very long.

In the lexicon of the homicide hounds and the crime reporters, there are two kinds of murders: "good murders" and "cheap murders." A good murder is one that takes place at a good address, and involves principals who are either notable or notorious. When Dr. Herman Tarnower, the famed "Scarsdale Diet" doctor, was cut down in a blaze of handgun fire in his

$500,000 Purchase home allegedly by Jean Struven Harris, the headmistress of an exclusive girls' boarding school and the lover he had recently jilted, that was considered a good murder. But on that same day, when one Puerto Rican stabbed another Puerto Rican in a dispute at a social club on East 138th Street in the South Bronx, that was considered a cheap murder. For it took place at a bad address, and it involved a victim and a perp who, at least as far as the cops were concerned, were readily interchangeable. Since far fewer people had ever heard of them, and because very few people cared about them, the murder was never solved, and it never made the papers. That made it cheap.

Generally, mob rub-outs were classed as good murders, although they often broke a lot of the rules. They were just as likely to take place at exotic addresses as they were at good addresses, and while they almost always made the papers, they were almost never solved. All the murders spawned by the matter of Building 261 were good murders, every single one of them. And every single one of them made the papers, too, and every single one of them was never solved.

Flatlands Tony made sure of that.

The twisted, devious machinations of this murderous knave could fill an entire volume. As he plotted the execution of Stacks Edwards, he also hatched a deadly master plan that could be used—and was used—against some of the bandits of the Lufthansa Six, as well as the other people like Stacks, the trucklers of the Robert's Lounge Gang. The scheme Flatlands Tony came up with was for a chain of killings, a chain where the killer in one hit became the victim in the next. It was a scheme with a precise, geometric symmetry to it, and it made Flatlands Tony smile. The tables would be turned successively as one hood would dispatch another, and then, in his turn, be dispatched himself. Doing the Big Job must have reached

such treacherous proportions before, but only Lufthansa would bring these blood-guilty doings to light, and only Lufthansa would produce so many of them.

They were what might be called the Br'er Rabbit Killings: Br'er Fox gobbles Br'er Rabbit, but then Br'er Wolf comes along to gobble Br'er Fox. Thus, the contract on Stacks (who was forced to play the rabbit) was filled by Two-Gun Tommy (who was forced to play the fox). Yet less than four weeks later, the contract on Two-Gun Tommy was itself filled by another flunky tapped by Flatlands Tony (who relished playing the wolf).

It was quite a scheme and quite a scam, and it was said that Tony Ducks was so impressed that he secretly decided to pursue the chain of killings to its logical end, and that was when Flatlands Tony himself became the last link in the slaughterous chain he had so fiendishly devised. That was when Flatlands Tony, who had killed all, was himself killed.

It was the ultimate irony of the Lufthansa story, and it supplied a new twist to the old saw: Br'er Fox gobbles Br'er Rabbit, Br'er Wolf gobbles Br'er Fox, but then a larger carnivorous predator comes along who gobbles up Br'er Wolf. Little did Flatlands Tony suspect, for all his carefree years of Doing the Big Job, that there existed a predator strong enough and ravenous enough to gobble up the wolf. But there existed one, all right.

Its name was Tony Ducks.

Stacks was the first to go.

A black hood who had long lingered on the fringes of the Italian mob, he had long ago exhausted his usefulness. He was fine when he belted out blues numbers in Robert's Lounge, or when he sold stolen dresses on Queens Boulevard, or even when he donned his telltale black chauffeur's

cap to drive around the big shots. But as a small-timer mixed up in a record-book haul, he was in so far over his head that it was a wonder he didn't drown a long time ago.

Stacks' involvement marked him for death in several different ways. It was said he was like Jerome A. Johnson, the Negro ex-con who shot the Don, Joseph Colombo, three times in the head in broad daylight at Columbus Circle on Columbus Day, 1972, right in the middle of the Italian-American Unity Day rally. Did Johnson really think he was going to walk away from there? Jerome A. Johnson was killed instantly by three different Colombo bodyguards firing from three different directions.

The same question could be asked of Stacks. Did he really think he was going to walk away from Lufthansa intact? Nobody like him, a low-level lowlife, would ever be able to walk away from Lufthansa intact. Besides, Stacks, like Johnson, was condemned to die in the eyes of the mob by his very involvement in the plot in the first place. His black face saw to that.

As if that weren't enough already, the gang had still another reason to dump Stacks Edwards.

Revenge.

He had mucked up the most important assignment he had ever received. Instead of putting the getaway vehicle into a Hudson County compactor, he had merely abandoned it on the streets of Brownsville, and then partaken of much too much Kahlua and cream. That alone would ordinarily have been enough to insure his execution.

Stacks was a strange sort, and the temptation—and the danger—is to elevate him to some kind of tragic stature. "Black enough for you?" he used to ask at times, but then at other times he would stage a complete role-reversal and dress more like James Cagney in *Public Enemy*. The fact is that Stacks was so much more a pathetic character than a tragic one. Black,

born poor, an outsider in the white man's society, an outsider even in the mob, the sentimental would say of Stacks that he was guilty—but not really.

The cynical would spot him for what he was—guilty as hell. And doomed. Helplessly, hopelessly doomed.

Stacks had been touched by the preparations for the big heist as most members of the Queens gang were; the only difference was that for him, those preparations proved fatal. He had been assigned to live in a safe apartment that became instead a death apartment. On December 6, 1978, following the orders of Jimmy the Gent, he had rented and moved into apartment 2B at 109-16 120th Street in Ozone Park. That was just five days before the robbery, and only fifteen blocks and three minutes away from the airport. On December 11, the day of the job, the sextet that knocked over Building 261 had stopped in that apartment for twelve critical minutes of work. By December 18, just seven days after the job, the keys to that apartment had passed into the eager hands of Flatlands Tony. Within an hour, those same keys had been transferred once again, this time into the hands of Two-Gun Tommy. And within six hours, around midnight, in that same apartment, Steven (Stacks) Edwards, male black, thirty-one, died suddenly in his sleep.

It was an out-and-out case of drygulching. Stacks was in bed, undressed, and under the covers when Two-Gun Tommy screwed the silencer onto the muzzle of his .45, unlocked the apartment door, crept into Stacks' bedroom, flicked on a light switch, and blazed away. His six bullets found their marks in Stacks' chest and head. Stacks had died the whispering death.

The next morning, the police found him bleeding like a bull, with a hole in his torso the size of *The New York Times*. They didn't even have to put a

blanket over him, since he was already wrapped up in one when his sleep was so rudely interrupted.

The honeymoon was over.

According to the story told by Tony Ducks' turncoat bodyguard, the Godfather took the news of Stacks' death with remarkable equanimity. "I'm terribly sorry to hear of it," he said, and you almost got the feeling that he meant it. "I'm always sorry to hear about one of God's creatures kicking off like that. So he's joined his ancestors, has he? Poor hump. We live in a jungle."

The murder of Stacks Edwards was just another of the 1,503 homicides recorded in New York City in 1978.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Waiting for Death

"Other sins only speak, murder shrieks out."

John Webster

Two-Gun Tommy was the second to go.

His was a revenge killing, too. Like Stacks before him, he had made a mistake involving a van, and like Stacks, the only forgiveness he would find for that mistake would come in the grave. Two-Gun Tommy had been put in charge of obtaining the second vehicle that was supposed to have been used in storming the Lufthansa blockhouse—a fairly simple chore for a punk hood who had been stealing cars all his life. But DeSimone botched this assignment, and the powers that be in the mob were out to make sure that he never botched another one. Because there was no second set of wheels, there was no second set of greenbacks. Because of the DeSimone blunder, the mob kitty swelled by only $10 million, instead of the anticipated $20 million, and because that additional, clean, tax-free $10 million was missing, a raging mob donnybrook had begun. It was a fairly simple proposition on the face of it: since there was only one car, there was no room for the ten thousand Big Ones, and since there was no room for the

ten thousand Big Ones, there was no room for Two-Gun Tommy either. It was a fairly simple proposition, yes, but behind it was an enormously complicated gangland rationale, a coldblooded, blood-curdling Mafia ethic that mandated the murders. An Old World revenge tradition so pervasive that even some of the victims must have understood why they were targeted for death.

Killing Two-Gun Tommy wouldn't bring back the lost $10 million in loot, that was certain. But all the same, Two-Gun Tommy had to be killed, and that was certain, too. And no one could have understood that any better than Two-Gun Tommy himself.

He had, after all, just pumped six slugs into the prostrate Stacks Edwards. He had carried out this last assignment with aplomb, though he must have known full well that it was his last assignment, and though he must have known full well that he would be the very next to go.

Why had he plugged Stacks Edwards? In part because Stacks had slipped up, and in part because he had been ordered to plug him. But there was more to it than that. Much more.

In the 1930s in Russia, deviant and condemned members of the Communist Party were asked by government officials to stand up at public show trials and confess their crimes against the regime. If they agreed to comply—and the crucial point here is that they were aware of this—they were still every bit as doomed as if they refused to comply. They would be purged either way. The remarkable thing is that so many of them were still willing to get to their feet and confess about the errant paths they had been following; and sure enough, just as they had expected, they were executed anyway. The victims became accomplices in their own murders. It was, as was said at the time, their last and most important service to the Party.

So it was, in the 1970s in Queens, for a deviant and condemned mobster named Two-Gun Tommy DeSimone. Plugging Stacks was perhaps his most important service to the mob, and it was certainly his last. Killing Stacks was, for Two-Gun Tommy, a kind of confession of guilt, a confession he really didn't have to make, for it could never have saved his life. He would have been killed himself, either way. But all the same, he felt that he had to make it, and perhaps it even did something for what was left of his peace of mind, as he waited for the curtain to come down on his own life. By killing Stacks, Two-Gun Tommy had also given the mob more ammunition with which to do away with him, for now there were more tracks to be covered, more cords to be severed. The fact that Two-Gun Tommy had confessed by killing, the fact that he so readily played Br'er Fox and gobbled up Br'er Rabbit, only to be gobbled up in his turn by Br'er Wolf, indicates just how sick the world he traveled in really was. Two-Gun Tommy was asked to kill, yet he knew that whether he killed or not, he would still have to die, yet still he killed; and sure enough, it sealed his fate. The slaying of Stacks was the last and most important service to the mob ever performed by Two-Gun Tommy. And then, inevitably, Two-Gun Tommy went off somewhere and got slain himself. And so the sequence came full circle, and the victim became once again a willing accomplice in his own murder.

It made sense, in a way. At least in the insanely lopsided world of the mob, it made sense. Stacks and Two-Gun Tommy had both slipped up. Ruthless mob logic demanded that Stacks and Two-Gun Tommy both be slain. Stacks had to die, and he probably knew why. DeSimone had to kill, and he had to be killed, and he probably understood the whole tangled progression that he was caught up in, and that ultimately claimed his life.

Except for the guys who did it, no one knows how they finally took Two-Gun Tommy, or when. Or where. No one knows who pulled the

trigger, either. About all that is known is that Tony Ducks and Flatlands Tony were lurking nearby, in the shadowy reaches above, coordinating the action and pulling the strings.

On January 14, 1979, Mrs. Cookie DeSimone reported the disappearance of her husband to the NYPD Missing Persons Bureau. At about noon on January 7, she said, he had borrowed sixty dollars in sawbucks from her and left their home at 116th Street in the Ozone Park section of Queens. She had cautioned him that it was freezing outside, that he was dressed much too lightly for the weather, and that he ought to put on a heavier winter jacket.

“It’s okay,” he explained. “I’m only going out for about a half an hour or so. Anyway, I’m wearing my long underwear.”

Those may have been the very last words ever spoken on this earth by Two-Gun Tommy. He vanished without a trace that afternoon, and neither Mrs. DeSimone nor anyone else has seen him since. His body has never been found. At first, investigators theorized that he had gone into hiding, but then the word came down from an informant that he had been neatly “disappeared.”

It was the end of Thomas (Two-Gun Tommy) DeSimone, male white, thirty-two, mustachioed bandit and halfway-house plotter.

“It was murder,” said the informant. “Pure and simple.”

But as the police inspector points out in Daphne du Maurier’s *Rebecca*, “Murder is never pure, and almost never simple.”

The killing of Two-Gun Tommy was just another of the 1,733 homicides recorded in New York City in 1979.

Everyone is in first place on opening day, but by the end of the season almost everyone gets knocked out, and only one team is left on top. Stacks and DeSimone were only the first victims, and as the season wore on, the Lufthansa body count grew.

Terry Ferrara was the next to go.

“I have a story to tell about Kennedy Airport,” she had said, and she must have realized even then that she would have to pay someday for the telling of that story. Some people are lucky at cards; others shouldn’t even sit down at the table. Ferrara was generally lucky, and she must have decided to bank on that luck, for she could hardly have harbored any illusions about the chances she was taking, the stakes she was playing for. She had violated the sacred code of *omertá*, the blood oath of silence, and for that there was only one penalty.

But Ferrara was no dummy, and she had hedged her bets well. After she had sung her song to the FBI, the Bureau had offered her ’round-the-clock, lock-and-key protection at a U.S. Army base somewhere in New Jersey. When she balked, the agents offered her airtight lodging at “the army base of your choice, anywhere in the country.” When she still refused, they offered her a trio of armed guards that would follow her every move. But Ferrara nixed that, too.

“Don’t you know what you’re facing back on the streets if they find out you’ve been talking to us?” asked an exasperated government man. “Why won’t you take the protection?”

Ferrara just shrugged off the question lazily. “The trick,” she said, “is for them not to find out that I’ve been talking to you. If I take the protection, they automatically find out.”

She was right about that, and she had covered herself well. Not that it made a bit of difference in the long run. But Ferrara was still playing a very

smart game, with rules of her own devising, and she kept on playing it, right up to the end. Had she accepted the FBI's offer of protection, it would be almost like handing Tony Ducks a signed and notarized letter announcing that she had turned canary and was happily chirping away. With a cordon of G-men around her at all times, it would be obvious to everybody in the mob that the feds were protecting a valuable piece of property that no longer belonged to the hoods of Queens, but that now belonged instead to the United States government. It would be like a wanted man with friends he might implicate walking into a police station, like a prison rat requesting solitary confinement. Ferrara might have been a dead duck anyway, but she wasn't about to get dumped by falling into that trap.

The way she saw it, if the Robert's Lounge gangsters ever found out that she was talking, they would find some way to get to her anyway, no matter what kind of protective cloak she was wrapped up in. They always did. So it made much more sense to shuck that protective cloak altogether, and hope they never found out she was talking. Ferrara decided to go back to the streets, where she was, of course, much more vulnerable, but where the chances were also significantly better that no one would ever learn about how she had squealed. Or so she prayed.

Meanwhile, in an old-law tenement on a forsaken street in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn, the FBI agents were making one last stab at getting Terry Ferrara to accept for her own sake their offer of protection. "I'll take the protection," snapped Ferrara to the feds at long last, "after you write me out a check for half a million. Not until."

And that was the end of that. Ferrara left Bed-Stuy without an escort, and she went back to her old haunts in Queens and Long Island—her $l,000-a-month Floral Park apartment, her thriving Bellmore beauty salon, her parties, her discos, her watering holes. But she never did get that check

for $500,000, and she never did take the protection. The end came much too soon. In spite of all the precautions she had taken, the mob found out that she was talking anyway.

How?

Sources inside the FBI's Queens office have supplied two different theories, both of which are extraordinarily frightening, and both extraordinarily damning to the Bureau's holier-than-thou image.

At around this time (late January, early February), Tony Ducks' attorneys apparently filed a request on his behalf under the U.S. Freedom of Information Act for access to his dossier, and any other intelligence the government had compiled dealing with his criminal activities. The request was routinely approved. It's believed that among the intelligence contained in this file was information bearing on his complicity in the Lufthansa caper. This information was specific in some ways, vague in others, right on some accounts, wrong on others, but generally it was such that Tony Ducks was able to figure out on the basis of it who was most likely to have provided it to the federals. The transcripts of the Bed-Stuy days were not included in the files, of course, but a great deal of the hard intelligence that came out of those Bed-Stuy days was included, and as he pored over it in his Whitestone mansion, Tony Ducks must have realized that it could only have come from one source—Ferrara. This was information that the FBI should have guarded much more zealously, information the G-men should have placed in one of those vaults where three different people each have only one-third of the combination. They owed that much to their prized songbird, and they had no right to put her story in an open file where mob rabbis taking full advantage of the Freedom of Information Act could get their sleazy hands on it. But the FBI has always had a penchant for efficiency, and the Bureau's paper-pushers and desk denizens worked

overtime on Ferrara's story, placing the relevant bits and pieces of it into the permanent criminal files of the eighteen felons she had implicated. Then, a few weeks later, one of those felons, a Godfather named Tony Ducks, turned around and asked to see that file, and the federals turned it over to him without so much as a whimper, something they never would have done for the NYPD. That file had Terry Ferrara's name stamped all over it, and because the federal agents gave it to Tony Ducks, they must bear some of the ultimate responsibility for condemning to death the woman who almost helped them break the case.

A couple of days after his Freedom of Information Act request bore fruit for Tony Ducks, he summoned a few of his top aides into his study. They remained closeted with him for several hours, talking obliquely all the while. At the end of the closed session, he called for his bodyguard, the man who later defected, and his message was short and sweet: "You know this girl, Theresa Ferrara? You'll read about her in the papers."

The Freedom of Information Act was passed by Congress in 1967, in part so that civil-rights activists, antiwar protesters, and black power militants could obtain copies of their files and check to see if they had been the victims of illegal government snooping. The men who drafted that bill could never have visualized the use that Tony Ducks would find for it. But it has been an open secret for years that the mobsters—who are often better versed in the law than anyone else—have been using it to get hold of their files, figure out the names of the informants who have been talking about them, and then kill them. Very probably, that is how Terry Ferrara came to die—because a bloc of knee-jerk liberals came together in Washington, D.C. one day and decided it would be a good thing to pass a law called the Freedom of Information Act.

The other theory about how the mob learned that Ferrara had been talking is even scarier. Tony Ducks has long had intelligence sources of his own—even within the FBI. According to this account, he got the word that she had begun to spill within hours of her dramatic appearance in the Bureau's offices on Queens Boulevard, when she first came in from the cold. And he got it from a federal agent who was in a pretty good position to know. This account could not be independently confirmed, but it is known that the FBI, fearing a leak, began an internal investigation immediately after the Ferrara abduction to see if it was a federal who had slipped the word to Tony Ducks. Nothing conclusive was ever resolved. But government sources still insist that at least one G-man, and possibly two, was on the mob payroll back then. That would explain the notoriously bad record the Bureau has in regard to keeping its informants alive. That would also explain the murder of Terry Ferrara.

When Terry Ferrara died, she died intestate. But perhaps her legacy was that nightmarish tale she left behind of the inability of the FBI to protect its own people.

Ferrara, like canaries everywhere, had a fatal flaw that spelled her doom. All you had to do was nail her once in the right place and she'd go down for the count. That's what happened when the mob higher-ups learned that she'd been talking. It wasn't exactly the type of blow that she could take in her stride and then come off the ropes swinging. It was, in fact, the very last blow that she would ever have to take.

It all happened very quickly. On December 20, 1978, nine days after the heist, she had walked uninvited off the streets and into a den of federal boys on Queens Boulevard. On December 22, she had allowed them to shepherd her into a dismal hovel in the darkest heart of Bed-Stuy. By January 7 of the new year, after she had talked in riddles for fifteen solid days, the $500,000

reward offer was posted. On January 10, after she had told everything she knew about the Red Baron, she left Brooklyn for the last time, and returned to her unisex hairdressing joint on the Island. But she only had thirty-one days left to cut and coiffure hair. On February 10, at about 5:30 P.M., she got a phone call in her Bellmore beauty parlor and left to meet a man a few doors away. Moments later, she was kidnapped and forced into the back of a car, and moments after that, she was brutally murdered and hacked, as if by a psychopath, into dozens of pieces. No one knows who the actual murderer was; no one knows which ill-starred flunky it was that Flatlands Tony managed to farm the contract out to. But what is known is that by 7:30 P.M., a seaplane stuffed with the butchered remains of Terry Ferrara had lifted off from a clandestine Great South Bay jetty, and that by 8:00 P.M., the little that was left of "confidential informant W-16-j, known to be reliable in the past," was dumped like so much chum into the Continental Shelf of the Atlantic Ocean. Her double life was over.

"There are lots of ways to play at this game," Terry Ferrara had said once, a long, long, time ago. "I play with the house percentages."

But this time the house lost.

Nobody else ever surfaced who could corroborate the story Ferrara had told. A dead woman cannot testify, and since she had made no sworn depositions, the only use the FBI ever found for all the gangland intelligence she had supplied was as background information in its criminal files.

For nearly four months after the Ferrara abduction, investigators drew a blank. There were no leads, there was no corpse, and there was no corpus delicti. Then, on the first day of June, 1979, a clam fisherman from a Jersey shore town waded into the surf and spotted the headless, limbless, mutilated torso of Theresa (Terry) Ferrara, female white, twenty-seven, beautician,

jet-setter, government informant, and “mystery woman,” bobbing up and down in the salt water off Barnegat Bay.

She was known to be reliable in the past.

The three killings to date had been revenge killings. Those are always the ones that come first, and neither Stacks, nor Two-Gun Tommy, nor Terry Ferrara could have been very much surprised. But in the next murder, the motive was a little harder to discern.

Little Marty had done nothing wrong. That’s what he kept telling himself. In fact, he had done a great deal right; he was Louis Werner’s bookmaker, and it was Werner’s debts to him that had helped make the whole heist possible. So deep was Werner into him that Little Marty had been able to deliver him irretrievably into the clutches of the stickup mob at Robert’s Lounge. But the problem was that Little Marty was an unknown quantity, and that he had never really proven himself. It was not that he was thought to be a risk; just that he was a question mark was enough. You can have question marks along for the ride if you rip off a rack of ladies’ clothing from the Garment District, or a containerful of Japanese motorcycles from the waterfront, or even a sack of rubies from West 47th Street, but if you snatch $10 million from an airport hangar, you better be awfully sure of all your people. No one was that sure of Little Marty. It was felt that his vast knowledge of the Building 261 shenanigans made him an unnecessary liability for the mob, and for that reason alone he simply disappeared one day, and he hasn’t been seen since.

Little Marty had been tipped off by a friend that there was a price on his head. He knew that he was on that “little list,” as the old Gilbert and Sullivan song had it, “of people who won’t be missed.” But there was very

little he could do about it, even with the foreknowledge of what was planned for him. It was a bitter pill for Little Marty to swallow—Little Marty, who by his own lights had done nothing wrong. But at least it was a bourbon-coated pill. Little Marty went from bar to bar, as bookmakers are wont to do, taking his bets, downing his shots and seltzer, and waiting for the end to come. He didn't even have the scratch to blow town, since he had just been creamed on Monday-night football. There was no particular rush on this contract, Flatlands Tony knew, since Little Marty wasn't going anywhere, and because a bookie must of necessity be accessible to his customers. Accessible to his customers meant accessible to his killers, and when Flatlands Tony found a man to do the dirty work, he told him to hold off on Little Marty until he could take him clean and easy.

The flunky staked out Little Marty for nearly a month before he struck. Poor Little Marty. Perhaps he felt that he had been given a reprieve. Perhaps he felt that, as in a jury trial, if they stayed out long enough they weren't going to convict him. But it didn't work out that way.

It happened in mid-February, 1979, around the time they took Ferrara. No one knows the exact date, or the time of day, or the circumstances of the hit, or how the body was disposed of. But it has been established by police investigators, on the basis of information provided by their criminal informants, that somewhere along his bar-to-bar circuit, in the neighborhoods of Queens and Long Island, Martin (Little Marty the Bookie) Krugman, male white, mid-forties, of Hewlett Harbor and Ozone Park, hairdresser, bookmaker, and Orthodox Jew, was disappeared.

Just one other thing is known: the actual killer of Little Marty was a two-bit hood known as Gas Station Joey.

Gas Station Joey had been impressed into performing his last and most important service for the mob. He pulled the trigger on Little Marty, and

soon, someone else would come around and pull the trigger on him. He was another Br'er Fox in the Lufthansa case—he gobbled the rabbit, only to be gobbled up in his turn by the wolf. It was the pattern of death. It was the means Flatlands Tony had chosen of Doing the Big Job.

Inside of three months, Gas Station Joey would be gone, too.

Richard Eaton, who liked nothing better than to quote poetry to the unappreciative stone walls who were his colleagues in crime, was a fish out of water in the mob. By rights, he should have been put out of his misery a long time ago. But Eaton had kept clean, and while he had enemies who resented his intellectual pomposity, they were never able to pin anything on him.

Until Lufthansa.

With Lufthansa, they had a field day. Eaton had been tapped as a courier to deliver some of the heist proceeds to crime captain Paul Vario, Sr., down in Florida. This he did. But apparently the temptation was too great. He got greedy and skimmed too much off the top for himself. When the mob learned this, and the contract came down, Flatlands Tony found himself literally besieged with torpedo "volunteers" who wanted to offer their expertise in croaking Dick Eaton. These were the hoods Eaton had slighted with his constant undertone of comments over the years; these were the hoods far over whose heads he had delighted in speaking. Now they were striking back. Now they were getting even.

Their first chore was to find out where he was holed up, for Eaton had gone into hiding right after he'd made his cash grab. That was almost child's play for this determined band of avengers. When they got the address of the apartment in Brooklyn, they handed it over to Flatlands Tony,

and the hit was made just twenty-four hours later. Flatlands himself was in on the pounce, this time. He barged in on Eaton at around dusk with three men from his volunteer corps, and the first thing he did was demand the money back.

“So,” said Richard Eaton wearily, as he faced the awful end with a feeling akin to detachment, “you envy the pirate his plunder?”

This was something Flatlands Tony didn’t want to hear about, for almost certainly he did envy the pirate his plunder. His job, after all, was to tick off, one by one, the men who had been party to a $10 million robbery. His job, after all, was to uncurl their rigid, dead fingers from the hold they had once had on a record-book pile of swag. He was dealing with high rollers, men who dealt in millions of dollars without sweating, even if they were doomed high rollers. Yet, by contrast, it’s estimated by police sources that Flatlands Tony himself was only paid between $10,000 and $15,000 for each mark he put the quietus on—a fairly meager sum considering his significance to the whole operation; a fairly meager sum indeed, considering the multimillion-dollar sums that were at stake, the sums which he was safeguarding for the mob through murder. That figure—$15,000 tops—gets even smaller when it’s remembered that Flatlands Tony had to fork over a couple of grand from it to grease his trigger-pulling flunkies. On the other hand, Flatlands’ victims had, in some cases, already received hundreds of thousands of dollars in pay-outs. Their shares were so very much larger than his could ever be. There were millions and millions of dollars out on the streets of southern Queens in those days, but so very, very little of it belonged to him. Richard Eaton, for instance, had apparently been paid $50,000 for his trip to Florida, and that was before he looted an additional $300,000 of the loot that was intended for mob coffers. Nobody knows where that money went, and unless it turns up someday lying at the

bottom of a safe-deposit box, nobody ever will know. Yes, Flatlands Tony envied the pirate his plunder, all right. But the only thing he could ever do about it was to kill the pirate.

Once more, he asked Richard Eaton for the mob's money back. Once more, Richard Eaton's response was a cool and collected no. "Say that the stars are not fire," he began, in a very liberal paraphrase of Shakespeare. "Say that the sun does not move. But don't ever say that you'll see that money again."

Flatlands Tony just looked at him with contempt. "You're no moron," he said. "Don't you know where you're going if you don't hand over that cash to us?"

Richard Eaton slowly, slowly nodded, and then an expression of mock sagacity came over his features. "To that undiscovered country," he quoted, "from whose bourne no traveller ever returns."

Flatlands Tony was thoroughly disgusted at this point, and also thoroughly confused. Here was a man standing on the threshold of the gallows who was still able to look his executioner square in the eye and laugh at him. Here was a man who insisted on blithely taunting his killers, and would keep on taunting them until the ultimate taunt was handed back to him—the noose. Here was a man bent on dying in exactly the same unfashionable manner in which he had lived—by talking obscurely over everybody else's heads.

Flatlands Tony was disgusted and confused, yes, but that didn't stop him from enjoying the macabre death preparations immensely. He watched as his three volunteers prepared the makeshift noose. He looked on with perverse delight as they fitted it around Richard Eaton's neck. Then he smiled that gleeful, toothy, preposterous smile, and quietly left the

apartment. But first, he asked his men to hold off on Eaton for an hour so he could drive off to a New Jersey safe site and establish an alibi.

Off he went.

In that hour, it seemed, Richard Eaton never stopped talking. It was, he knew, his last hour, so he was certainly entitled to it. And as usual, he was talking more to himself than to anyone else. When his time ran out, he stared hard into the faces of his three hangmen, and then he opened his mouth once again, and for the very last time.

“So you’re my avenging angels,” said Richard Eaton with a sneer.

The three men tightened the ligature, and Richard Eaton never said anything else again. The body was whisked out of the apartment in the dead of night, and discarded without ceremony in a stolen trailer.

That account of the death scene in the Eaton hideaway was supplied by an unnamed gangland informant who was brother to one of the three volunteers who stormed that hideaway. His story eventually wound up in the hands of a law enforcement agency, and from there it was leaked to the author. That makes the story a third- or fourth-hand account, but its authenticity has been confirmed by independent police sources. The informant’s name, and that of his brother, are being protected. But the two other people who were in on the kill have been identified.

One of them was Frenchie McMahon. The other was Paola (the Vamp) LiCastri. These were no avenging angels. These were a pair of Br’er Foxes who were living on borrowed time themselves.

The date was February 17, 1979, the very next day, when a bunch of frolicsome school kids discovered the frozen stiff lying in the back of the abandoned truck trailer on Blake Avenue in the East New York section of Brooklyn. When the police arrived, they found the corpse relatively intact. There were no marks on it, but its limbs were bound, and there was a

crudely fashioned noose made of Manila hemp secured around its neck. The strangulation victim, Richard Eaton, male white, forty-two, linguist, Notre Dame graduate, man of letters, wheeler-dealer, and racketeer, was carted off in an ambulance to the New York City morgue.

They put him on a sliding slab, and they wheeled him feet-first into a stainless-steel refrigerated chamber that was kept at thirty-eight degrees Fahrenheit all year round. The body-storage room. They put him behind a little square numbered door, one of 130 in the morgue, a door that resembled a coin locker at a bus terminal or a train station. They looped a sturdy blue cardboard identifying tag around his right big toe. When the toe tag was on, they closed the metal door to his compartment.

Upstairs, in the lobby of the morgue, there was an inscription in Latin: *Taceant colloquis effugiat risus. Hic locus est ubi mors caudet succurere vitae*.

It was exactly the type of line that Richard Eaton himself might well have quoted once. Loosely translated, it read, “Let conversation stop. Let laughter cease. This is the place where the dead delight in helping the living.”

The next day, they pulled Richard Eaton out of his frigid compartment for an autopsy. For the New York City Medical Examiner’s office, First Avenue and 30th Street in Manhattan, which houses the busiest morgue in the world, it was just another one of the 9,127 autopsies performed there in 1979.

The autopsy findings came as a surprise to no one: “Death by hanging. *Definitely* not self-inflicted.”

“The pathologist knows everything,” as the old adage puts it, “but twenty-four hours too late.”

And so Richard Eaton passed from the scene, Richard Eaton who used to quote moodily from “Only the Dead Know Brooklyn,” Richard Eaton who had sneered at his killers when they knotted the noose around his neck one wintry evening right there in Brooklyn. Not even Hollywood could have thought up a better ending for him.

Cast a cold eye, on life, on death; hoodlum, pass by.

“You’ve got to know when to hold ’em,” like they say in poker, “and you’ve got to know when to fold ’em.” Gas Station Joey Manri and Frenchie McMahon didn’t fold fast enough.

They had been promised two hundred G’s as their cut back in the days when the mob was gunning for $20 million; then, when the mob made off with a mere $10 million, they had been asked to take a hundred G’s instead —to take it, and like it. In a strictly mathematical way, it made sense. The proportions and the percentages were still exactly the same. It seemed just enough. And indeed, Gas Station Joey and Frenchie McMahon did take it. But they didn’t like it. Not even a little bit. They wanted another $100,000 apiece. They felt they’d been promised it, felt they’d deserved it, were still holding out for it—and had begun to grumble audibly. Yes, they should have folded a long, long time ago. Now it was too late.

Everything was nice and quiet that spring morning—like a funeral.

Manri and McMahon had an appointment to keep. At sunup, at long last, they were going to pick up the money that was due them at a Brooklyn street corner. Or so they thought. Instead, they picked up something else that was due them. It was the cream of the jest. They had driven to a neighborhood called Flatlands expecting a payoff, and they got a payoff, all right—but it was one they had never bargained for.

The identity of the two killers is unknown. Carrying canvas money satchels, they entered the rear doors of the car, just as planned, which must have put Manri and McMahon at ease. You can't palm a .45-caliber handgun. These thugs didn't even have to try. In unison, they pulled at the toggles of the money bags, and Manri and McMahon must have been pleased that the cash would be in their hands at last. In unison, too, the killers drew something out of the money bags, but it was not money. Manri and McMahon were not only startled at the sight of the two gunmen whirling in their seats with cocked handguns, but they were killed by them. They didn't even have the time to be crestfallen. They died with their greedy hands outstretched to take in the greenbacks.

It was May 17, 1979, at around 9:05 A.M., when police opened the front doors of a Buick LeSabre parked on Schenectady Avenue in the Flatlands section of Brooklyn, and circled with chalk the bodies of the two men lying inside it who had been slain with a single pistol bullet each through the head.

One of the men was identified by his fingerprints as Joseph (Gas Station Joey) Manri, male white, forty-seven, of Ozone Park, robber of gas stations, Lufthansa bandit, and killer of Little Marty Krugman. The other man was identified through papers found in his wallet as Robert (Frenchie) McMahon, male white, forty-two, of Wantagh, Long Island, small-time numbers runner for the late boss Hughie Mulligan, blundering bandit of the $3 million Air France job, Lufthansa's "director of commissary and provisions," and killer of Richard Eaton.

The Br'er Rabbits had been slaughtered first. Now it was the turn of the Br'er Foxes.

Yes, Gas Station Joey and Frenchie McMahon should have folded a long, long time ago.

The Vamp should have folded, too. The Vamp had been a contract worker, and a good one, but after the Building 261 shortfall he had wound up in the same boat as Manri and McMahon: He wanted one hundred Big Ones over and above what he had already pocketed. And the Vamp was even more brazen than they were in the way he went about getting it—or rather, trying to get it. He threatened to blow the whistle on the whole job, and the whole mob. His was really a very simple proposition: the money, or else. Simple enough to die for.

The Vamp had been strung along rather successfully by the wise guys at Robert's Lounge. Sure, they told him, you'll get your money, just keep quiet and bear with us for a little while longer. The Vamp had done exactly that. He bided his time as he waited for the cash, and perhaps it was to pass that time of day as much as anything else that he joined the Richard Eaton death party.

Flatlands Tony was biding his time, too. Smiling. Waiting. Preparing. This would be perhaps the ugliest of all the Lufthansa murders, and quite deliberately, for the Vamp had to be taught a brutal lesson that any other potential transgressors would be sure to heed. That was how the message of the hit came down: "This one doesn't have to be clean."

It wasn't. Flatlands Tony set out to frame a killing as obscene as anything he had ever devised to date.

It was about 3:00 A.M. on June 8, 1979, when the three unidentified mobsters grabbed the Vamp and spirited him away to a safe house somewhere in the Borough of Churches. They worked him over good. They spent hours on him. Autopsy findings indicate that they performed at least a dozen different torture techniques on him: lit cigarettes, rusty razor blades, cowhide whips, knives, glass shards, two-by-fours, kerosene down the gullet, bullets in his arm when he was still alive. The gruesome list goes on

and on. It was later determined by pathologists that as much as fifteen pounds of flesh from the Vamp's legs and stomach had been sliced out of his body while he was still conscious. Their work done, the killers finally drilled the Vamp with five bullets in his chest and head, and then they dumped his ravaged remains where they felt he belonged—in the sprawling city garbage dump in Brooklyn, next to the mountainous piles of stinking refuse.

It wasn't until June 13 that police found the Vamp, lying where the hoods had left him amid the broken bottles and the food scraps and the discarded furniture. He had already become a part of the acrid stench that was the waste of eight million New Yorkers, and the stray dogs were already sniffing all around him.

A man walking his dog near the dump that day felt a sudden tug on the leash, and then the dog broke free and ran off to the grave of the Vamp. That was how the body was discovered. Police arrived at the dump site, off Crescent Street in the Flatlands section of Brooklyn, and then the forensic photographers went to work.

It wasn't a very pretty burial site, but then Paola (the Vamp) LiCastri, male white, thirty-one, of Sicily and Ozone Park, illegal alien, convicted murderer, Lufthansa bandit, wheelman, and killer of Richard Eaton, had never been a very pretty man. And now he hardly looked human at all. He was eventually identified only through his fingerprints.

There he was, half-naked, looking up at the sky, the blood caked on his body where there should have been skin, and a piece of his head blown away. Livor mortis had already set in, that hideous discoloration that takes place throughout the corpse due to the gravitational sinking of its blood. The maggots had already attacked the Vamp's festering wounds, and the flies already covered his face.

When Flatlands Tony got the word of how the Vamp had been kicked off, he smiled with all his teeth. He was staying at a kosher resort in the Borscht Belt where he had gone to establish his alibi, and he couldn't have realized on that sunny day that he had just grinned his last toothy grin.

But the die was already cast. The dead would have their revenge, and so would the living.

It was still June when the true master of Doing the Big Job made up his mind. Once he had reached a decision, things started to move with the usual swiftness he demanded. An aide answered his call, and the command this time came in a whisper.

"You know this guy, Flatlands Tony?" he said. "You'll read about him in the papers."

Tony Ducks had already gotten his money's worth from someone who was basically a hired hand. This was no time to take chances.

The rabbits had been savaged, the foxes had been slaughtered, and now it was time to butcher the wolf.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The Jungle

> “Mother of Mercy, is this the end of Rico?”
> (dying words of Caesar Enrico Bandello)
>
> W.R. Burnett, 1929,
> *Little Caesar*

Flatlands Tony didn’t have a care in the world. He had done what he had had to do, and he had done it well. He was finished with his murderous assignments for the mob. He was on Easy Street at last. Nothing could bother him now. Certainly not those aged yentas with their orange hair, their mah-jongg tiles, and their plastic nose protectors. Not even the effusive social director who kept on trying to match him up with them. Not the male resortniks either, who demanded to know what he had done with his yarmulke. Not the kreplach at the table, which was much too soggy, nor the Nova Scotia at the buffet, which was far too salty. Not even those infernal country crickets that insisted on murdering sleep by chirping away interminably, all through the night.

No, nothing could bother Flatlands Tony now, for his work was done, the murders were at an end, and it was time to relax, and then move on.

The scene was an upstate New York hotel, a kosher retreat for old people, somewhere outside of Monticello, in the green, rolling hills they called the Jewish Catskills.

This was the place where Flatlands Tony had chosen to spend the month of June, 1979, but he hadn't come here for any of the usual reasons. He wasn't looking for a September affair, or a nickel-stakes game of canasta, or to play the trotters and the pacers at the big harness track down the road. He had come, in part, so that he could be as geographically far away from Brooklyn as possible when the Vamp got his. Yet he wasn't just looking for an irrefutable alibi. If that was all he wanted, he could as easily have gone to Staten Island, or anywhere else at all where he could see and be seen. No, Flatlands Tony had something else in mind; he needed a place where he could lie low after his killing spree, where he could dodge the heat he had generated and steer clear of the law and any grieving mobsters there might be in Ozone Park. A quiet kosher resort in the heart of the Borscht Belt was perfect. Not that all those guests wouldn't ask him any questions; they would, of course, and they did. He was, after all, the only Italian in the crowd. But they tended to regard him fondly, as a kind of amiable curiosity, and they left him pretty much to his own devices. There was still another reason why Flatlands Tony had ventured forth into the wilds of Sullivan County: he needed a vacation. Doing the Big Job can take a lot out of a man—especially doing it so many times in a row, especially engineering a bloodbath—and now that it was all over, he clearly needed to unwind. And so Flatlands Tony, who would never get to know that it really wasn't all over, went off on his very last, last holiday. Like the good sport that he was, he had already resigned himself to ducking the yentas, smiling away at that sickeningly gushing social director, politely declining the kreplach, and covering his head with a pillow, like any good city boy would, when the sun

went down and the crickets came out and the trilling went on and on and on.

He even found that he enjoyed it a little bit, though of course he had enjoyed killing more. But he would never kill again.

Meanwhile, 116 miles south-southeast, in the borough of Queens, New York City, a determined man stepped into his car and began the long drive to work. He went over the Tri-borough Bridge and up the Harlem River Drive, then over the George Washington Bridge and up the Palisades Interstate Parkway. He then turned onto the New York State Thru way, and got off twenty-six miles later at Exit 16, the Harriman exit. Then he pulled onto Route 17, where the hills began, and he slid past the sleepy towns with names like Goshen and Wurtsboro and Rock Hill, until at last the big green sign came into view overhead.

“MONTICELLO,” it said. “POPULATION: 5,991.”

Here he turned on his blinker and got off the road and sprang into action. Involuntarily, he hunched his shoulders and lapsed into the hunter’s crouch—that somewhat ludicrous crooked crouch which is the hunter’s standard posture when he catches the scent of his quarry, though can’t quite make out the sight of it yet. He screwed up his features, looked sharp, and began to stalk his prey. He was just a man on his way to work. But he carried with him in the trunk of his car the deadly tools of his deadly trade: the razor-sharp logger’s axe; the double-barreled, sawed-off shotgun and plenty of shells to make it speak; and the trusty ferric shovel to bury his dead. Before too long, he would be using every single one of those tools. Yes, he was just another man from Ozone Park on his way to work.

His name was Dominic, though all his associates called him the Hun, and he had come to the Jewish Catskills to kill Flatlands Tony. The Hun had six or seven notches, and he had, in fact, worked for Flatlands Tony himself

several times in the past. He had earned a reputation as somewhat trigger-happy, but he had good aim, and had been quite effective in the clutch and on difficult hits. The Hun had been a kind of apprentice to Flatlands Tony, and he had actually done the dirty work for him on several occasions as Flatlands had drifted off somewhere to establish his alibi. Perhaps the Hun resented this. In any case, he was a natural for the assignment. Police suspect that he was the man who got the word to Flatlands at his upstate hideaway that the Vamp had been hit. If true, it meant that Flatlands still trusted him, and would probably keep on trusting him right up until the end, and more important, it also meant that the Hun knew the name of the hotel where Flatlands was staying. Very valuable information, as it turned out. Flatlands Tony had good reason to trust the Hun; as part of his torpedo apprenticeship, police believe, the Hun took part in executing at least two of the Lufthansa contracts. (No one knows which ones. But in several of the killings, the assailants were never identified, and in each of those killings, the Hun ranks high on the law's list of possible suspects.) Yet the Hun's apprenticeship was coming to a very speedy end. In a black business such as his, in the terrible trade known as murder-for-hire, there was only one way in which the pupil could ever hope to surpass the master. And that was by murdering the master. This was what the Hun set out to do. This was what the Hun did. The instant he discharged the barrage of lead pellets from his double-barreled shotgun into the dying, twitching body of Flatlands Tony, he was an apprentice no more. He had become a journeyman.

The Hun checked into a hotel near Kiamesha Lake, a couple of hoots and a holler up Route 42 from the place where Flatlands Tony was staying in Monticello. Close enough to keep an eye on him, far enough away not to be spotted by him. Then began the work that was far and away the tensest and most difficult part of any kill—the waiting.

This period lasted for about five or six days, a period in which Flatlands Tony appeared to do little more than sleep, eat, watch TV, and sip iced liqueurs by the swimming pool.

Finally, the big moment came.

It was on or about the last day of June, 1979, according to an underworld source's retelling of the story, give or take a day or two. Flatlands Tony got into his car and went out for a little spin. He drove north, and then west. A car with a single male occupant was following him all the while. It happened just off Route 52, between Liberty and Ellenville, in the vicinity of a little speck on the map known as Loch Sheldrake. The Hun forced Flatlands Tony off the road. He sprayed him with shotgun bullets, and pumped several extra rounds into him just to be on the safe side. He lifted the limp body into the trunk of his car, and the red rivulets of blood came cascading down his arms. Then he took Flatlands Tony's car and dumped it into the bottom of a nearby water hole, where it has never been found and doubtless sits rusting to this very day. Then the Hun turned around and got back onto Route 17, and calmly drove those 116 miles south-southeast, back to the borough of Queens, New York City, as his precious cargo of human flesh began cooling down to the environmental temperature and stinking up the trunk of his car in the process.

The Hun took the stiffening remains to a safe house in Ozone Park. That was where the axe came in. He chopped an unsmiling Flatlands Tony to collops, reducing him to the very fatty, fatty folds of his own flesh. After midnight that night, he drove to a previously selected dump site in Brooklyn, where a close mob friend of his was laying down the concrete foundations for an expansion of his home. That was where the shovel came in. The Hun scooped up the bits and pieces of Flatlands Tony, and they went into the centrifugal whirl of the cement mixer. It was inside that churning

vortex that Flatlands Tony—brutal killer of Stacks, Two-Gun Tommy, Terry Ferrara, Little Marty, Richard Eaton, Gas Station Joey, Frenchie McMahon, and the Vamp—was transformed into a finely pulverized powder made of alumina, silica, lime, iron oxide, and magnesia. Cement. The very next day, a pair of hardhats arrived for work, and poured that cement into the foundations of the house. Flatlands Tony had become a part of the underpinnings. It was probably the single most useful purpose he had ever served in his sixty-odd years of wretched, gleeful, murderous existence: helping to support a building.

Perhaps it was a coincidence. Perhaps it was just another example of the mob's macabre sense of humor. Or perhaps it was actually intended as a ghoulish eulogy for him. But in any case, the building Flatlands Tony was helping to support was located in the neighborhood that had given him his name, the neighborhood that had been the scene of so much of the Lufthansa drama, the neighborhood where so many of his victims' bodies had been dumped: the Flatlands section of Brooklyn.

And so it was that Flatlands Tony, male white, mid-sixties, of no known or fixed abode, smiling torpedo *extraordinaire*, possessor of thirty notches, and Br'er Wolf, became a permanent part of the cityscape, a concrete fixture in the precincts of Brooklyn that had done so much for his career. It was an awfully sick monument to an awfully grisly career.

As for his killer, Dominic the Hun, what will happen to him, now that his main assignment was so successfully completed and his usefulness so thoroughly exhausted, is anybody's guess. Presumably, he'll have to be killed too, and then his killer killed, in another chain that could well become an infinite cycle. But whatever it is that may be in store for him, it hasn't happened yet. The Hun is still walking the streets.

There was one final, bizarre postscript to the murder of Flatlands Tony. Up in Monticello, the hotel owners were greatly upset by his sudden disappearance. Who would ever have thought that such a polite, smiling, affluent gentleman would run out on his hotel bill? The guests were very surprised, too. “It’s not like him,” said one of the resortniks. “And such a nice man, too,” said one of the orange-haired yentas.

The manager, in a bid to puzzle out the mystery, used his passkey to enter Flatlands Tony’s room. He found two suitcases, a closetful of clothing, and several hundred dollars in cash. The clothing was later donated to the Hebrew Immigrant Sheltering Aid Society, and the cash was promptly used towards settling the room bill. But the manager found something else in the room, something that didn’t make any sense to him, something that was very strange indeed.

Clippings. Newspaper clippings. Newspaper clippings from the three New York dailies. Newspaper clippings that already showed signs of yellowing. The clippings all told the same story. It was the story of a series of horrifying, cold-blooded murders that had taken place in New York City. Murders that had taken place in the aftermath of what the papers all called “the crime of the century.”

Perhaps Flatlands Tony had been thinking of starting a scrapbook.

It was 1946, and racketeer and hit man Benjamin (Bugsy) Siegel was building the Flamingo, the first casino-hotel to rise out of the desert on the Las Vegas Strip. The construction contract had gone to Del E. Webb, who would later become part owner of the New York Yankees. But Siegel was in trouble—his checks were bouncing, and he was way behind schedule on his payments. One night, Del Webb paid him a visit. “I was waiting for my

money," he said, "when he told me that he had personally killed twelve men. But then he must have noted my face or something, because he laughed and said I had nothing to worry about. 'There's no chance that you'll get killed,' he said. 'We only kill each other.'"

They only killed each other. That much was certainly true of the Robert's Lounge Gang, and they certainly did a lot of that. But there were no innocent bystanders cut down in the Lufthansa bloodlettings. In a business like that, perhaps, there was no such thing as an innocent bystander. One way or another, the eight men and the one woman who had died had all deserved to die. They only killed each other, and therefore you couldn't feel too sorry for any of them. From Two-Gun Tommy, who had said earnestly, "It's okay…I'm wearing my long underwear," to Richard Eaton, who had said with a sneer, "So you're my avenging angels," to the Vamp, who had been taught his last lesson, slowly and lingeringly. Yes, they only killed each other.

And now they were done with the killings. The murder of Flatlands Tony was like releasing a brake for the mob. Once he was gone, gangland wheeler-dealers and power brokers went into a mad frenzy of planning and investing and scheming and hatching all sorts of new scams. After all, they had $10 million in the kitty to do it with. And now that the question marks had all been retired, now that the big mouths had all been unceremoniously laid to rest, there was nothing to stop them from spending it. Tens of millions could be parlayed into hundreds of millions, for there was no such thing as a windfall-profits tax for the mob. There was no end of enticing possibilities, and now each man began to play with his nest egg.

Mr. Y went out and bought himself a gold-plated humidor, and everywhere he went, he seemed enveloped in the billowing fumes of his H. Upmann. He had finally gone to his favorite Miami tobacconist and bought

him out with a fistful of cash. “The Rockefellers didn’t make their money by putting it in the bank,” he explained. He was putting his in cigars, a lifetime supply of them.

Paul Vario, Sr. began buying up every scrap-metal dealership he could get his hands on. He muscled his way into some of them, papered and smooth-talked his way into others, and generally moved, like the takeover king that he was, to corner the junk-salvage markets in Florida and New York. “What’s the price of pig iron on the Brooklyn market?” he liked to ask. “How about bronze-copper alloy in The Bronx?”

Tony Ducks was more cautious. He slowly began to seek out good investment opportunities, and he consulted legitimate financial advisors on Wall Street and Park Avenue. He bought stocks and bonds and even T-bills. But he moved slowly, warily though his mansion, because he was quite shaken up over a few incidences of random violence in recent months. It was all very upsetting to his health, he said. When the news of the Flatlands Tony hit reached him, he closed his eyes and sadly shook his great, gray head. It was just one more example of urban decay. “We live in a jungle,” he said.

Jimmy the Gent was also disturbed by the killings—genuinely so. He had, after all, lost some pretty good drinking buddies. But he had no say in these matters. Even though he had planned the raid on Building 261, it didn’t belong to him anymore. It was all decided elsewhere. So he cut his losses and fingered the rosary beads a few more times than usual, and then he raised his glass in an old Irish toast to the memory of his departed cronies. “May they be in heaven,” he said, “ten minutes before the devil knows they’re dead.” With that, Jimmy the Gent began to ponder what to do with his newfound wealth. As if there were any question. He went on the booze, and made the rounds, and bought drinks for anyone in the south of

Queens who'd have a drink with him, and slowly, steadily, he dumped his wealth through the scuppers of every taproom in the borough. "Let's have a drink on Lufthansa!" was the cry that greeted him, and he heard it again and again. By the time he decided to shop around for a gin mill of his own in Ozone Park, it was already too late. The money was gone. Like water through the scuppers.

Jimmy the Gent just shrugged it off philosophically. "We earn it today," he said, "we hoist it tomorrow."

We live in a jungle. And now that the jungle had claimed its dead, nothing could ever be the same.

After the murders and the publicity, Robert's Lounge became a minor tourist attraction. Frank Sinatra and Ella Fitzgerald were replaced on the jukebox by the Village People and Disco Duck. The regulars stopped coming. The joint was sold. New management took over, and the place was cleaned up. The craps table went out the window. The exercise room for gamblers who couldn't pay up—the "gym"—was closed down. The cots in the "dormitory" were chucked out. For the wise guys of Ozone Park, the final indignity came as they drove down Lefferts Boulevard on their way to the rackets at Kennedy and the Big A. The little neon sign with the single word, "BUD," still flickered in the window, but above it, in enormous letters, was a large eyesore that proclaimed the new name of the place as the "South Side Inn."

Robert's Lounge was no more.

The most powerful saloon satrapy of the Tony Ducks-Paul Vario-Jimmy the Gent organization had become just another chapter in the history of big-time crime in the Naked City.

The wintry morning of December 11, 1978 had been the finest moment for Robert's Lounge. And though no one knew it at the time, it had also been its last moment. A year after the heist, the bar was unrecognizable, and the gang itself was decimated, its principal members jailed, in flight, turned government informant, or dead.

It was only those lucky few who stood atop the very pinnacles of the mob hierarchy who were free to smoke their expensive cigars, gnaw away at their juicy steaks, down their high-proof whiskey, and cavalierly go about the business at hand—planning the next job.

EPILOGUE

(or, What Next?)

> “There are three things you can do when they come for you: You can run; you can face them down; or you can throw your hands up in the air imploringly, and ask your God, ‘Where did it go wrong? Where did it all go wrong?’”
>
> Maier Suchowljansky,
> better known as Meyer Lansky,
> from exile in Israel, 1971.

There is an old Mafia maxim: you sit for one year on each million dollars you make off with. The FBI adds a corollary: no one ever manages to do it.

Unusual spending patterns follow every big heist, and the bluecoats zero in on them. Whenever a huge block of cash passes into unlikely quarters, a few standard questions are posed: “Did anyone buy his wife a mink?” “Is anyone driving a shiny new Thunderbird who should only be driving a battered old Plymouth?” “Has anybody made inordinately large payments to the books?” “Is anyone planning a trip?” Each time, the lawmen learned, the answer was yes.

Those were exactly the same questions that Brink's robbers Jazz Maffie and Sandy Richardson had found themselves fielding almost thirty years earlier. Those were exactly the same spending patterns that the two crafty old ex-crooks had so recently warned about. But their warnings fell on deaf ears. Or perhaps human nature simply made it impossible for the Lufthansa felons to heed those warnings. In any case, because those warnings went by the boards, and because of the intelligence Terry Ferrara had supplied, the FBI was finally able to make four arrests in the case.

They were minor arrests, to be sure. Only one man was ever charged, tried, convicted, and sentenced for the heist itself. The other three arrests weren't very solid, and they didn't stick, and two of those three men have already been back on the outside, walking the streets, for months. But they were arrests all the same, and they made the papers, and they did a little something for the FBI's image, which had been badly bruised and slightly tarnished by the matter of Building 261.

What small successes these Keystone Kops ultimately had may indeed be attributed to a lot of blunders that were made on the other side of the law.

Lufthansa cargo supervisor Peter Gruenewald, who was still on the Red Baron's payroll, used his employee discount to get cheap air tickets to Bogota, Taiwan, Tokyo, Hong Kong, and the Philippines—anywhere other than Queens. The FBI had been keeping close tabs on all the German airline's workers, and the agents picked up Gruenewald, suitcase in hand, on the very day his flight was to leave for South America. He was arrested without incident at his home in Levittown, Long Island. Gruenewald was never charged with anything, merely held as a material witness in protective custody. In return for a grant of immunity from prosecution, Gruenewald agreed to cooperate with the government and help nail Lou Werner, and his testimony at the trial later on did prove damning to Werner's protestations

of innocence. Once he was caught, he was only too eager to testify against Werner, for it was Werner with whom he had drawn up the original plans for the robbery, and it was Werner who had subsequently stolen those plans from him. In court, it was revealed that Werner had paid Gruenewald a small amount ($10,000) from his already small heist proceeds ($85,000), once Gruenewald started to complain about this injustice. The point was to shut him up, but it didn't work out that way. Gruenewald got nervous about all those G-men he was seeing under his bed, and that was when he decided to flee the country—to take the money, piddling as it was, and run. But the federals nabbed him instead, thus sealing Werner's fate, too.

Then there was Lufthansa bandit John Angelo Sepe. Sepe, who was also the Long Island Connection drug runner responsible in his own bumbling way for the tie-in between the heist and the failed junk smuggling bid, had committed a remarkable string of indiscretions. While the other thieves were talking about sitting tight on their cash for so many years, Sepe was out throwing his all over Queens Boulevard. He just couldn't resist his first real taste of the big money, and soon he had handed a car dealer $9,000 in fifty- and hundred-dollar bills—apparently from his heist proceeds—and driven away in a sparkling 1979 Thunderbird. Sepe also bought a Cadillac for a woman friend, talked too much to strangers in bars, boasted openly about the airport caper, and made two large payments to bookmakers. (But more than anything else, it was the T-Bird that proved Sepe's undoing, for it came equipped with an FBI bug.) It was Ferrara who had first clued the Bureau in to Sepe's involvement in the crime, and the G-men and all the other cops from all the other squads had stuck to him like glue. Now that they had a record of his wild spending spree, it was time to do something about it. The arrest itself, however, was something of a misadventure. Sepe was picked up before the government had gathered enough incriminating

evidence to indict him for armed robbery in the Lufthansa job. He was known to be a stickup man, but he could be held only as a parole violator. According to one theory, he was arrested prematurely by the FBI only because the federals feared that the Queens District Attorney would nab him if they didn't. And because the arrest was made too soon, the bulk of the surreptitiously recorded tapes made from the bug in Sepe's great new car contained nothing but rock-and-roll music.

It happened like this. The FBI told the NYPD that it was about to make an arrest in the case, and the Bureau invited the force to send an observer along the next day to witness that arrest. Not half an hour later, Channel Four television reporter Heather Bernard called an FBI spokesman and said, "I understand you're going to make an arrest in the Lufthansa case tomorrow." The FBI was furious at this apparent leak from the city bulls. They considered whether to change their plans. They debated whether to call off the arrest. Then they came up with another solution. The next day, when a top city police official showed up to watch Sepe brought to justice, he was taken for a ride and wound up in midtown Manhattan when Sepe was arrested in Jamaica, Queens.

(The FBI has an interesting explanation for this snub. The agents who were driving the NYPD big shot accidentally tuned into the wrong frequency on their sensitive, high-powered radios. As a result of this unfortunate mistake, the Bureau claims, the agents crossed into Manhattan over the 59th Street Bridge at exactly the same moment that other FBI agents tailed Sepe's T-Bird in the opposite direction, out of Manhattan, through the Queens-Midtown Tunnel.)

It happened at the corner of 120th Street and Jamaica Avenue in a residential section of central Queens. A carload of armed federals forced Sepe's blue 1979 Ford Thunderbird off the road, and then the agents

jumped out and cuffed Sepe. With him in the car was a man named Jimmy the Gent Burke. Burke, much to his surprise, was allowed to walk away—for the moment. It was Sepe the agents were interested in now. He was locked up on a parole rap, accused of violating the terms of his probation by associating with known criminals. Not surprisingly, one of the known criminals with whom he was specifically charged with associating was a man named Jimmy the Gent Burke.

John Angelo Sepe is still in a Manhattan jail cell today, and perhaps he is better off there. For the same string of financial indiscretions that landed him behind bars could very well end his life. It's believed that the mob issued a contract on Sepe a few months after he was jailed, and that at least two attempts were made on his life. But Flatlands Tony wasn't around anymore, and both of those attempts were farces. Mobsters first tried to raise Sepe's one-million-dollar bail so they could get him free and then kill him on the day he walked out of jail. But Sepe's bail was voided, so that didn't work. Then they tried to finish him off inside his tightly guarded cellblock, nine floors above Foley Square. The scheme involved another inmate who would get to him with a smuggled kitchen knife, but that didn't work, either. Perhaps next time.

Then there was the hapless Louis Werner, the Lufthansa cargo agent who helped rob his employers. Werner had first been fingered by Terry Ferrara, and an airtight case had been built against him after FBI agents conducted interviews with almost a thousand airport employees. The most important of these turned out to be Peter Gruenewald, and when Gruenewald was locked up as a material witness, he began to tell the long, long story that would eventually lead twelve jurors to say of Werner, "Guilty."

Werner was arrested at one of his favorite hangouts—a bowling alley in Lawrence, Long Island, just a few miles away from JFK. The feds waited until he stepped off the lanes one night and got into his car. Then they pounced. They put a gun to his head. They told him not to move. They put the come-alongs on him. And then they asked him how he had bowled on that particular evening.

Werner had recently paid off his creditors—two bookmakers and one loan shark—and bought a new van. Werner always said he hated New York, and he was planning a long trip when he was grabbed.

The trial was memorable. Werner's lawyer, Steven Laifer, claimed that his client had been the victim of an unfaithful wife who had told the FBI tall tales about her husband's alleged wrongdoings in an effort to extort money from him. "Mr. Werner," Laifer said, "is a man who, for want of a better word, has been cuckolded."

Judge Mark A. Costantino's wisecracks kept the trial from ever getting dull. "Cuckolded?" he demanded. "I haven't heard that word used since the last Shakespeare play I attended."

(Werner's domestic life was, in fact, a mess, and it may have led in a small way to his downfall. His wife had split up with him, and she was demanding child support money from Werner's share of the Lufthansa grab bag; or else. Since Werner didn't pay her any money, she went to the FBI and told the Bureau all she knew. It wasn't very much, but it was just one more piece of evidence in the mounting pile against him. Lou Werner, plotter of the $10 Million Getaway, then made a rather nervy gesture. Acting from jail, he sued his wife for divorce, asking her for substantial alimony payments. His wife would respond at first by refusing to accede to the divorce, citing her interests in the possible sale of his story, and the allure of the "movie rights." Werner was upset by all of this, and in court

one witness said he had spoken of the possibility of his wife falling from a ten-story window. Peter Gruenewald had been threatened, too, the witness said. But Lou Werner was a little guy, and even a nice guy. He wasn't capable of any such violence himself. No way. It was a lot of saber-rattling, but very little of the saber.)

Then there was the day the prosecution called Janet Barbieri to the stand. This was the dramatic high point towards which the Werner trial had been building for days. Mrs. Barbieri, a thirty-six-year-old Long Island divorcee, is the woman Lou Werner even today wants to marry in jail. The government, convinced that Werner had admitted his role in the robbery to her, had first called her to testify before a grand jury investigating the matter. Reportedly, she had repeated Werner's admission of complicity in the crime and given evidence against him, but only under duress, and after she had been threatened with jail for contempt if she refused to speak. Now she was asked to repeat her story in the courtroom, a story she didn't want to tell. It was a classic trial-drama story, and the tabloids had a field day with it. Mrs. Barbieri, the *Post* said, was the "JFK heist trial woman who would seal the guilt of the man she loves." She was the "reluctant witness," the "slender brunette witness," the "mystery witness," and the "Werner lover witness."

After what happened next, Janet Barbieri soon became the "collapsing witness." On the day she was called to testify, as she stood in the courtroom door, her knees suddenly buckled and she fell to the terrazzo floor, gasping dramatically, "Lou, Lou, Lou, Lou, Lou…" She would wind up in that same position, sprawled on the courthouse floor, on at least three other occasions in the trial, forcing several adjournments. Her attorney, Alexander Fine, claimed that she had suffered a heart spasm while waiting in a witness room, and that forcing her to testify would jeopardize her health. Fine asked

that she be excused from testifying because the emotional pressure would be very dangerous for her. But court-ordered medical tests concluded that Mrs. Barbieri was merely suffering from “an emotional anxiety neurosis,” and that she was in no danger of a heart attack. The following appears in the transcripts:

> MR. FINE: She has been diagnosed to have an anxiety.
> THE COURT: Neurosis. Half the world has that, and the other half is trying to get it.

As Mrs. Barbieri kept right on collapsing, Judge Costantino eventually found himself in the unusual position of having to order the arrest of a key government witness as a material witness. After her arrest, Mrs. Barbieri finally took the stand, responding to questioning at one point while lying on a spectator’s bench with a psychiatrist at her side. Indeed, her testimony was somewhat damaging to the man she loved.

But Lou Werner probably would have been convicted anyway. The jury might have bought his argument when his lawyer, Laifer, claimed that prosecution witness Gruenewald had been trying to take himself off the hook. After all, that much was certainly true. But the jury certainly didn’t buy it when Laifer argued that the government’s case against Werner had been built on “a foundation of mud.”

It was a pretty solid foundation.

After a ten-day trial in the U.S. Eastern District Courthouse, Brooklyn, New York, in May, 1979, before a jury of ten men and two women, Judge Mark A. Costantino presiding, Louis Werner was found guilty on three counts of robbery. After his conviction but before he was sentenced, Werner was taken before a federal grand jury, granted immunity from further prosecution, and asked to tell what he knew of the crime. He wouldn’t even

open his mouth, and he was held in contempt. Werner, as the *Times* delicately put it, was “apparently afraid of retribution by unsympathetic accomplices, both in and outside of prison, in the view of the authorities.”

In June, Louis Werner, forty-six, of 122-02 Linden Boulevard in the Ozone Park section of Queens, an eleven-year Lufthansa veteran, was sentenced to sixteen and a half years’ imprisonment. The cargo handler who had never spent a moment in jail until the night he was arrested was thrown out of the Masons, assigned Bureau of Prisons number 10880-158, and remanded to his new home—Cellblock Nine South in the Metropolitan Correctional Center.

And so it was that the full weight of the United States federal government all came down on Werner, who wasn’t even there when the robbery happened, and who made off with less than one percent of the spoils.

But that was the best the government could do. As Jimmy Breslin would write: “Charging Werner in the robbery is like blaming the night porter at the Three Mile Island reactor.”

The big question for the present is whether or not Werner will decide to talk deal. If he does, and if he survives, he could put the finger on a lot of people and maybe bust the case wide open. It’s known that the government has been pressuring him to talk with the promise of a lighter sentence and a new identity out of town if he does. The government has also been playing games with him. There have been threats of new charges against him, and even the gratuitous arrest of his sister on unrelated insurance-fraud charges on the Island. The gang has a lot to be worried about if Werner eventually decides to go along. At his trial, federal prosecutor Edward McDonald charged that Werner had been paid some of the $85,000 of his promised share in a secret nighttime meeting in a car parked behind a deserted gas

station in Nassau County, not far from JFK. If Werner decides to identify the man in the car, the FBI has a good crack at learning, through him, the whereabouts of the loot. If Werner talks about his plotting sessions in the saloons, the FBI has a good crack at finally nabbing the looters. Those are the big ifs.

And then there's one other. If the mob decides to kill the man in the car, then even if Werner decides to talk, it may do the G-men no good. And there are indications that the man in the car may already be dead. Lawmen feel it is more than a coincidence that Gas Station Joey Manri and Frenchie McMahon were murdered on a Brooklyn street last May, on the very day that Lou Werner was convicted in the Lufthansa job. As Flatlands Tony had known so well, there are often more reasons than one to kill a man.

Shortly after Louis Werner was convicted, a sign went up at the bowling alley where he was arrested. "The man who stole millions from JFK was arrested on Lane 24," the sign said. "Bowl here."

One other person was eventually arrested. His name was Jimmy the Gent Burke, and he was the ringleader of the whole operation. Burke drove the FBI nuts. They staked him out for months, but they couldn't get a thing on him, and he would lead them on wild-goose chases time and time again. Burke would be in his house late at night, when suddenly he'd come running out, get in his car, and drive off, with a couple of carloads of federal agents in hot pursuit. He would drive like a maniac around the neighborhood, honking his horn and flashing his lights, and then he'd turn around and drive back to his house again and go to sleep. Burke's antics infuriated the FBI. He began to taunt the Bureau over the wiretaps he knew were installed in his car and home. That was a slap in the face the FBI

simply would not take, and in the end the Bureau decided to do something about it.

There was another reason to get Jimmy the Gent: he had become too notorious. He treated Lufthansa's hundred-dollar bills cavalierly, and his braggadocio was something else. His stunts were splashed across the front pages of the tabloids, and he plainly enjoyed basking in the limelight of his crimes. The name "Jimmy the Gent" looked good in print, it was of perfect size for the headlines, and perhaps it was that, as much as anything else, that led to his jailing.

(It was the old Dutch Schultz syndrome all over again. The Dutchman had started out as a minor hood from the Bronx named Arthur Flegenheimer, but when he took the name Dutch Schultz, and when the name stuck, he became a ranking crime figure, a legendary crime figure, and it was that name which ultimately led to his downfall. The problem was simple: his adopted name made good copy, and it made things easy for the newspaper slot men who wrote the heads. Since the name got a lot of press, so did the man, and soon the law was breathing down his neck. As Dutch Schultz himself once observed, "If I had stuck with Arthur Flegenheimer, nobody ever would have heard of me.")

Burke's moment came on April 12, 1979, at 8:15 A.M., when a heavily armed team of FBI agents, U.S. marshals, and federal probation officers came for him at his home at 78-02 160th Avenue in the Howard Beach section of Queens. Burke went along without a struggle. He knew they had nothing solid on him, so why compound it by resisting arrest? They locked him up on a parole violation for associating with known criminals, specifically John Angelo Sepe.

Jimmy the Gent Burke, forty-seven, grand architect and mastermind of the heist, Bureau of Prisons Number 96380131, the Irish Godfather of an

Italian mob, was no stranger to prison bars. He knew he wouldn't be in very long this time, and he was right. A few months passed, and after he had served out his parole rap, they let him go. They just couldn't pin anything else on him. He was too smart for them.

A man who was present when Jimmy the Gent was arrested said Burke had waited until the handcuffs were on and the Miranda warnings read to him, and then he had turned to the agents and said, "You don't do the crime if you can't do the time."

It was something he had learned in transactional analysis at the Otel Bryant.

The story of the Lufthansa heist is still a story without a finish, as mysteries deepen without being solved. It will probably remain that way forever.

Why, for instance, didn't the people who were murdered and the people who were arrested simply flee town? Why do investigators feel that they never left New York, and that perhaps the farthest they ever got from the scene of the crime was the Bronx?

Those questions may be easier to answer than some of the others. Says one top investigator, "Naturally, you'd think they'd blow town, skip the country, go to Paraguay or Costa Rica or the Bahamas, even Algeria or somewhere they never heard of extradition, and live like kings. But not if you know these guys, not if you've ever had a drink with a one of them. They're New Yorkers. It's written all over their faces. You can tell it the instant they open their mouths. They wouldn't be comfortable anywhere else. How could they sleep without ambulances, fire engines, police sirens, the sounds of broken glass in the night? What would they do in South America?"

Only the two Lufthansa employees, Lou Werner and Pete Gruenewald, with the traditional rootlessness of the airlines worker, ever planned to leave town. For the six gunmen and all the hangers-on in the mob circles of southern Queens, New York was the only option they had. There might be an occasional trip to Florida or Las Vegas, but it was in New York that they would hide out, go to jail, and murder one another.

It all began when a man named Lou Werner walked into a joint called Robert's Lounge. "There's $20 million in the cargo vaults at Lufthansa," he had said then, and it seemed such a long, long time ago. "I know it's there, I know how to get to it, and I know how to take it away. Interested?"

Yes, they had been interested, all right.

And to this day, not a cent has been recovered. Not a gemstone has ever turned up at a pawnshop.

And nowhere in the world is there a record of a single dollar stolen from Building 261. The money was clean, unmarked, the day it was taken. Yet, as if by instinct, the mob still goes through the old, familiar motions of laundering it. One old trick is the "chip transfer." You take the hot money down to Atlantic City, buy a large pile of chips from one window, walk across the casino and cash them in at another window, and leave immediately with your clean money. Do Not Pass Go. Do Not Collect $200.

Where's the money? Theories abound.

A mob courier drove to Florida one day, and the FBI got a tip he'd left a $250,000 chunk of the heist proceeds in a Miami-area safe-deposit box. Agents got a court order and opened the box, but too late. The money was gone, and a month later there was a fashionable new restaurant opening up in Dade County.

If you talk to the feds, they'll tell you the money is all in two places—New York and Florida—and still largely intact. But the mob tells a different story. The cash has diffused through three continents, says one crime source. And while huge blocks of it remain untapped, Mafia investments worldwide have benefited. There's a cattle ranch in South America, a few semi-legitimate business fronts in Europe, and closer to home, refinanced "chop shops," scrap-metal firms, and private carting concerns in Brooklyn and Queens.

Post columnist Murray Kempton had his own theory about what happened to the money. "It is," he wrote, "no doubt scattered in a thousand cookie jars in Ozone Park."

The hunt still goes on—for money, bodies, and crooks. The FBI says it is "guardedly optimistic" about the Lufthansa case.

"You must be kidding," Jazz Maffie had said once.

But the Bureau never kids.

AFTERWORD

Months passed. Nothing happened. Investigators got nowhere. The probe was at a dead standstill. The statute of limitations, still four and one-half years away, loomed inexorably. *The 10,000,000 Dollar Getaway* had already entered the final mechanical stages of production. Then, in June 1980, a break came. The feds got a tip that there were bodies buried under the former Robert's Lounge. They came, armed with search warrants, and dug a hole beneath the basement. They found three spent .38 caliber handgun shells and a tidy pile of bones.

Investigators' hopes rose. Did the bones belong to the missing Two-Gun Tommy? Were they those of the missing Little Marty the Bookie? Had Mr. Y or the Hun suddenly fallen from grace? Or was it just another faceless wise guy at the old Robert's Lounge who became the eleventh victim of the big money greed? When the Medical Examiner's report came in, however, investigators' hopes were dashed. As this book went to press, the bones were identified as those of a chicken and a horse. Why had a horse been buried under a gin mill? One of the insiders from the old days, when the bar was famed for its scams at the Big A and JFK, had a theory. A few years back, a ringer was entered in a race and came in at fabulous odds. The horse the ringer was substituted for, according to this source, was killed and buried in the basement. The story may be apocryphal, but at the old Robert's Lounge, with its horse bones and alleged human burials, anything is possible.

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